

LEGACY'S END
DEPARTED GODS

GREGORY O. SCOTT

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Dramatis Personae

AG-37, assassin droid
Jao Assam, former Imperial Knight (human male)
Yaga Auchs, *Mand'alor* (human female)
Deliah Blue, mechanic (Zeltron female)
C-3PO, protocol droid
Hogrum Chalk, intelligence director (human male)
Antares Draco Fel, Imperial Knight (human male)
Marasiah Fel, empress (human female)
Darth Havok, Sith Lord (Iktotchi male)
Eli Horn, Sith apprentice (human male)
Ganner Krieg, Imperial Knight (human male)
Kyra, traveler (human female)
Lowbacca, Jedi Master (Wookiee male)
Darth Nihl, Dark Lord of the Sith (Nagai male)
R2-D2, astromech droid
Azlyn Rae, Imperial Knight (human female)
Ahnell Recado, president of Bakura (human male)
Sauk, mechanic (Mon Cal male)
Cade Skywalker, Jedi Knight (human male)
Ania Solo, fringer (human female)
Marin Skirata, Mandalorian rebel (human female)
Gar Stazi, admiral (Duros male)
Jariah Syn, fringer (human male)
Darth Talon, Sith Lord (Twi'lek female)
Shado Vao, Jedi Master (Twi'lek male)

Prelude: A Long Time Ago...

From the outside Anil Kesh looked like a three-legged spider straddling the Great Chasm, its central copula suspended over the gap by a trio of metal half-arches. Beneath it, mountain ridges tumbled into blackness that claimed even daylight. As she stood on the temple balcony, looking down into the gap, Tasha Ryo felt a deep disquiet not from the darkness but the Force itself. Every Je'daii adept could feel the wrongness of the Chasm. Some said the black rift contained a well of Force-power more raw and dangerous than anything else on Tython. Others claimed there was something in it that twisted Je'daii perceptions and turned minds toward madness. All agreed that it was a place best studied from the safe distance of Anil Kesh.

There were nine temples on Tython in which Je'daii adepts gathered to study the Force, and Tasha had always tried to avoid this one. Other Je'daii studied science and alchemy here, claiming that the Chasm's unique properties made Anil Kesh ideal for experiments. Even now a shaft of energy plunged from its central cylinder into the black gap, scouring for quantifiable information on the Chasm. For Tasha it had always seemed dangerous, even reckless, like dancing on a cliff's edge.

The Chasm unsettled her more than most; though she'd never ventured inside it she could still sense some of what it contained. Some Je'daii were called to be scientists, other rangers or teachers. A young journeyer, Tasha was training

to become a seer. She had been touched by visions of the future since childhood and she felt especially vulnerable to the Chasm. Time inside the black rift was not what it should have been.

Finally she'd just learned a little truth of it, and that unsettled her all the more.

"I knew it was a bad idea to enter the Chasm," her uncle said as he stood beside her on the balcony. "But I was young then, and confident. We'd just won the Despot War. We thought there was nothing a Je'daii couldn't handle... So my friend Daegen Lok and I descended as far as we could, farther than any other Je'daii."

"Farther than any who've come back," Tasha whispered.

Her uncle nodded gravely.

Warm wind rushed up from the Chasm, playing with her green robes but barely rustling Hawk Ryo's simple brown tunic. He was a Je'daii ranger who spent most of his time on the other inhabited planets in the Tython system, from sun-warmed Malterra to far-out Ska Gora, and of course their homeworld of Shikaakwa. Hawk was a fighter and an adventurer, a very different kind of Je'daii from Tasha altogether. She'd never known how different until today.

She hugged herself tight against the wind. "What did you see in the Chasm?"

Hawk lowered his head and bent over the railing. Grey *lekku* trailed off his shoulders and dangled toward the black. "I blocked this from my memory for so many years. It drove Daegen mad. I could have been... just like him."

"Please, Uncle." Tasha was afraid to hear it, but she knew she must.

Hawk's voice dropped to a whisper. "I saw stars on stars, planets and planets. Thousands, millions. I saw infinity that day. I thought I could grasp it in my hand. For that moment... I think I *knew* those worlds. I knew everything about their names, the kind of beings who lived there and the civilizations they built... Even though there was no way I could have known."

Tasha nodded. Everyone in the Tythan system knew the galaxy was a vast and teeming place, though without spacecraft capable of exceeding lightspeed none of them

could reach the other stars. They knew, nonetheless, that those stars teemed with life, and that faster-than-light travel was possible. The denizens of the Tythan system had, thousands of years ago, come from dozens of other planets and represented as many species. Those among them who'd felt the call of the Force had found entry to the great Tho Yor, black spacecraft shaped like double-pyramids joined at the base which had collected Force-users from distant planets and gathered them here on Tython to commune together and train in the Force's ways.

That had all been thousands of years ago. Children of Je'daii who couldn't feel the Force now outnumbered those who could and had settled the system's other planets, where the Force was less dangerously strong than on Tython. No one knew why some children of Je'daii were touched with the Force and others not. Hawk Ryo's brother, Tasha's father, had no such power. Volnos Ryo, a Shikaakwan crime lord, had nonetheless fathered a daughter with a Kora Ryo, Je'daii master. Both parents crowded Tasha, trying to turn her into an heir. She threw herself into studying the Force in hopes it would offer something that transcended petty family squabbles.

Transcendence was elusive and there was so much they still didn't understand. Tasha lifted her head and saw one Tho Yor hovering silent above Anil Kesh, as it had for generations. No one understood how the great black starships operated, nor who'd made them, or for what purpose. No Je'daii had stepped inside one since the Great Migration ten thousand years ago. They only knew that the Tho Yor had chosen their ancestors to train on Tython.

Hawk was staring down at the Chasm still, face furrowed. He seemed stuck in memory. "I knew *everything* in that moment," he whispered. "The stars. The past and the future. It was too much. I had to pull away."

"What did you see of the future?" Tasha whispered.

"I can barely remember any of it, thank the Force." He closed his eyes. "But... I saw armies in the darkness. Warriors with blades of pure light. I saw monsters, aliens the like of which Tython's never seen."

"Did you see them *here*, on Tython?" she asked.

"I... I think so." Hawk shuddered, lifted his head, and opened his eyes. "I've been trying very hard to forget that, Tasha."

"I've seen it too," she whispered.

"I was always glad not be blessed- or cursed- with visions. Then I inflicted one on myself. I'm lucky I didn't go as mad as Daegen Lok has."

She touched her uncle's arm. "It's not just the future we saw. It's *now*."

"Now?"

"I've met the pilot of the strange starship that crashed here weeks ago. He's human and can use the Force, but in a different way than any of the Je'daii here. He doesn't care about keeping the opposite halves of him balanced. He draws entirely on his own anger and fear. He embraces Bogan."

She cast a look skyward. Beyond the hovering Tho Yor she saw the faint daytime outline of Ashla, the light-colored moon in Tython's sky. Bogan, the dark moon, was for now hidden, but often they occupied the sky together. It was the constant sight of those moons that had led the Je'daii to theorize the Force has possessed two halves that needed to be kept in balance.

"Some Je'daii," Hawk said warily, "can become unbalanced too."

"The human was *trained* to embrace Bogan. Bogan is all he knows." She shuddered at the memory but had to press on. "I touched his mind. I saw some of what he's lived. It's a terrible thing, Uncle. No companionship, no love. He was raised to be a weapon. And in his memories I saw the weapon-makers."

"Aliens like we've never known," Hawk said. "Creatures with tall heads and eyes jutting out of stalk on either side. Green and blue skin, hairless but not scaled, like amphibians. They wield blades of light and they *all* use Bogan's power." He clenched the railing hard. "And they sent that ship as a scout?"

"They're coming to Tython. Your vision in the Chasm is about to come true." Her uncle closed his eyes. She could feel him struggling to grapple with the unleashing of his memories but she pressed on. "The aliens are called the

Rakata. They already have an empire that spans the stars, and they're coming here. Soon. They've embraced Bogan, stole then technology of other civilizations, and turned them all into weapons. They're *monsters*, Uncle. I don't know how we can survive this."

He stiffened. "The pilot told you all that?"

"Not just him," she shook her head. "Uncle, come with me to Akar Kesh."

She could feel Hawk's reluctance. The man wanted nothing more than to jump onto his ship and fly out to adventure in the farthest reaches of the Tythan system. Though he was a ranger he was also a Je'daii, and he knew he could not evade his responsibilities.

"All right," he said, "Show me everything you've found."

From the Chasm it was several hours by air to Akar Kesh. The Je'daii of old had built their temples at stunning vistas and this was no exception. Located atop of a high butte rising from salty seas, the complex at Akar Kesh took the form of eight monolithic stone slabs, evenly carved by Je'daii craftsmen thousands of years ago and arranged in a circle around a broad shallow lake. Beneath the edifice were quiet meditation chambers, large gathering halls, and secure vaults where the Je'daii kept some of their most prized artifacts, some of which were said to date from the time of the Tho Yor arrival. Like Anil Kesh and the other temples, a Tho Yor hovered silently in the sky above. This one was larger than the other eight, and like them, nobody understood what purpose the great devices served. It was like they were standing sentinel over the temples, waiting for a command that only the Force could issue.

Tasha and her uncle barely spoke on the ride to Akar Kesh. He'd walled himself off in the Force and she got no intimation of what he was thinking as she led him through the stone-carved underground corridors until they found Master Ketu. The human, elegantly middle-aged with tan skin and a trim beard, was in a study room, pouring over some of the old written histories, when the two Twi'leks entered. He looked up from his book, took in Tasha and her uncle, and said, "So you've come for it then."

"He needs to know what we know," Taha said, but hesitated to tell more. Her uncle had been repressing memories of what he'd seen in the Chasm for a decade and she didn't want to drag out his secret.

But Hawk said, "I need to know what Daegen Lok and I saw in the Chasm. What we *both* saw."

Ketu's eyes narrowed at the confession, but he nodded and rose. "I'd warn you, Hawk, what we've learned isn't comforting."

The Je'daii ranger snorted. "I'm disturbed enough as it is. Tell me everything, Ketu."

"Follow me, then."

The human led them to the secure lower levels, Hawk behind him with Tasha in the rear. To her it felt like a funeral procession. When the human unlocked the door to the vault Tasha saw it was just as she and Ketu had left it several days ago. The twin objects sitting on the table were an odd contrast. One was a skull with an elongated cranium, eye-sockets mounted on either side, and a small jaw full of still-sharp teeth. The other was a glass-smooth and eight-sided double-pyramid, shaped like a Tho Yor but small enough to hold in two hands.

"We recovered the skull from the vehicle crash site," Ketu explained.

Hawk bent close to look at it. "It's like nothing I've ever seen on Tython, or any other world..."

"Do you think *this* is what you saw in your visions?" asked Tasha.

Her uncle shook his head. "I don't know. What I saw was obscured by darkness... and it was alive."

"The human who survived the crash carried a weapon," she added. "A blade of light ignited by the power of the Force."

Hawk's frown deepened and he shifted attention to the double-pyramid. "What is this? Some kind of... holocron?"

"It is exactly that," said Ketu. "Adept Ryo, would you like to show us?"

Tasha took a deep breath and steadied herself. The holocrons she'd worked with previously had been recorded by Je'daii generations past and contained digital gatekeepers in the persona of long-dead masters. Part of her training as a

seer had involved studying the past extensively, and while she was used to holocrons this one reacted like no other. A powerful, concentrated Force presence was required to make it speak. On her first attempt the device had shut her out, and she'd had to take it to senior masters for help.

This time she had to at least try and do it herself. Tasha cupped the holocron between her palms, held it up before her, and reached out with the Force to connect with the energies pulsing through the ancient device. They reacted to her touch and a ghostly blue image resolved from the pyramid's peak. The creature that appeared was another unfamiliar on Tython, at least to those still living. The tall long-necked body was draped in robes and the leathery blue face that peered out was roughly reptilian, with vertical-slit eyes and a mouth of small fine teeth.

"Peace," the creature said. "I am A'nang of the Kwa, last of the Tython Kwa, master of the holocron. Ask, seeker, and I will guide you."

"Fascinating," Hawk muttered, "Do we know how old this holocron is?"

Master Ketu shook his head. Records by the early generations of Je'daii reported being taught by saurian aliens called Kwa, but their kind had gone extinct on for Tython many thousands of years. Like the cephalopod Gree who'd supposedly built Tython's Old City, time and obscurity had reduced them to legend.

Opening the holocron had been easy for Tasha; now she readied for the hard part. Still firmly touching the device with the Force she said, "Please, Master A'nang, tell us again of the Rakata."

The Kwa in the image lowered his head, and the reply was mournful. "If you would revisit the coming grief, then I will not stop you. The Rakata are a pestilence on the galaxy that to our shame we, the Kwa, unleashed."

The image of A'nang was replaced by one showing a sea of creatures with elongated heads and jutting eyestalks gathered around a single Kwa. Behind the Kwa was great archway made seemingly of stone, but the arch's interior was set aglow by crisscrossing beams of light. Tasha had seen this before, and the holocron's next words were familiar.

“Through the use of the infinity gates by which we traversed the galaxy, we came to the Rakata homeworld of Lehon, drawn by the power of the cosmos- what you call the Force. The Force was strong within the Rakata and, as we had done with so many worlds, we helped the Rakata understand that power and gave them advanced technology.

“But we wrongly misjudged the nature of the Rakata and underestimated their inclination toward evil. In all of our travels, never had we encountered a species that lived only to conquer and destroy. The Rakata cannibalized their own. By the time my people understood their true nature... it was too late.”

The next images showed the stalk-eyed beings, the Rakata, committing cascading acts of violence. They tortured their own, invaded other planets and pummeled them with laserfire. They took captives by the millions, attached them to machinery, and brutally extracted life force from their bodies. Most horrifying of all, their deeds were accomplished by use of the Force.

“The Rakata ignored the balance of the cosmic power and stepped themselves in only one aspect of the Force, the dark side. Ultimately, they used it and it alone. They paired their aggression with the new technology we had given them and left Lehon on a journey of conquest. They conquered and enslaved world after world, calling themselves the Infinite Empire. Their target almost always was a planet rich in the Force. They discovered they could induce hate and fear in Force-sensitive beings they enslaved and harness that energy to power their warships.”

Hawk winced as he watched. It was little easier for Tasha, though she'd seen it before. It was just a recording, but she could almost feel the hideous dark energy that emanated from the Rakata. Theirs was the darkness of Bogan spread across an entire civilization. No one could have conjured a more terrifying nightmare.

The next images showed more war, but of a different kind. Explosions flashed and bodies, Rakata and Kwa both, spread around the luminous stone arch they'd seen before. The holocron said, “Ultimately, the Rakata wanted the secret of infinity gate technology. We refused to give it to them, so

they made war on us, their benefactors. We did not give it to them. Many Kwa died holding off the Rakata on Lehon until the infinity gate there could be destroyed.”

A great explosion filled the projection, overtaking and apparently destroying the glowing arch. Abruptly the light died and was replaced by the sole figure of A’ngang himself.

“Following the Rakatan debacle, my people destroyed or disabled most of the gates and retreated to our homeworld, Dathomir. We withdrew from the galaxy in the face of increasing Rakatan aggression, knowing we helped unleash the Rakata on the galaxy. Some few remained here on Tython. I was among them.” The Kwa’s voice became mournful. “The Rakata are powerful, brutal, and if they come to your world you are doomed. I am sorry.”

Tasha could feel her uncle gather anger, but when Hawk spoke his voice was level. “I can’t accept that. What is the Force for if it can’t save us against monsters like that?”

A’ngang shook his head. “My people once ruled a vast stellar empire. We were at our height when the Rakata rose to power. Even with the Force as our ally we were unable to defeat them.”

“Then Bogan is stronger,” Hawk muttered.

“If by Bogan you mean the dark, untamed aspects of the Force, you are wrong.” A’ngang said it as a rebuke. “However, the Rakata have mastered it in a way neither we Kwa nor our contemporaries could.”

Tasha had read about the Kwa in her studies. Along with the Gree, the Killiks, and several other species, they’d been cited as one of the great civilizations to have spanned the stars, but were already in decline at the time the Je’daii order was founded on Tython. She’d never gotten a chance to consult Kwa sources directly and knew this was the only chance she’d ever have.

“Master A’ngang,” she said, “You make it sound like *all* the Rakata can touch the Force instead of just a select few. Is that right?”

“It is.”

“And was the same among your people?”

The face in holocron looked surprisingly reticent. “It was, for many eons. Yet when the Rakata began to rise, our own

connection with the Force started to dimmish. It began revealing itself to fewer and fewer individuals. Some of us theorized the Force was withdrawing as punishment for our leashing the Rakata on the galaxy. Others thought the Rakata had engineered a way to steal our power from us or infected us with a disease. If a solution to this dilemma has ever been found, I do now know it."

"What about your contemporaries, like the Gree?"

"I believe the Force withdrew from them too. I'm afraid I cannot tell you more."

"How fortunate for us," Hawk said sourly, "The Rakata have retained full use of it. Tell us more about these infinity gates."

Tasha had read a little of them in her studies. Supposedly the constructs could instantly transport matter across the galaxy without need of a spaceship. Je'daii scientists had a theoretical understanding of faster-than-light travel, but all the ones she'd known had dismissed the gates as legend.

"With the gates, we Kwa bridged the stars," A'ng said. "We travelled by spacecraft as well, but the major worlds in our holdings were linked by instant travel."

"How did they operate?" Tasha asked. "Were two gates specifically linked, or could one gate transport matter to different locations?"

A'ng's chuckle was dry and rattling. "We called them infinity gates because that is what they granted: infinity."

Beside Tasha, Hawk muttered, "Stars on stars, planets on planets..."

His words didn't register to the holocron, which continued, "One of our gates could lead anywhere in our empire. I understand the Gree had a parallel system, though their gates could only lead to a matching destination. Whether they stole our machinery or we improved theirs, I cannot say. Some things are lost even to me."

Master Ketu, undistracted by technological talk, asked, "Master A'ng, in your time, could sentients from all the major civilizations touch the Force naturally?"

"If you mean was it available to all, then yes."

"Then why is it only some of us here can touch the Force? Even children born to two Je'daii parents sometimes can't

use it. We have to send them offworld, to Kalimahr or Shikaakwa, for their own safety. Other times the Force manifests itself in the parents on non-Je'daii children. We've never been able to understand how or why."

The Kwa shook his head. "If we knew why you younger races can touch the Force so rarely, we might have an explanation for our own loss. I'm sorry, Master Je'daii. I have no solution for your problem."

No solution for any problem, Tasha thought grimly. Though the Force tugged her toward the future, her visions always raised more questions than answers, which was why she'd often looked to the past for guidance instead. Sometimes it offered wisdom. Now: more questions and worse, dread.

"I have little solace to offer you," said A'nang. "However, I will say this. Though the Je'daii are small in number your connection with the Force is richer than anything the Rakata will ever know. They drown in their own darkness. When they come to Tython you must stand firm and be ready to make whatever sacrifice is necessary to protect your home."

"You already told us we were doomed," Hawk said bitterly.

"And it is when facing death that you must stand bravely. The Tho Yor gathered you Je'daii for a purpose. For ten thousand years you have trained. Perhaps, now, you will finally discover what that purpose is. But you must stand firm."

"Stand firm and face our deaths," said Hawk.

"I wouldn't surrender like a coward," Master Ketu said.

"Nor should you. Consider this your trial, Je'daii. *Stand firm.*"

Then, all its words apparently said, the holocron went dark in Tasha's hands. Carefully, she set the double-pyramid on the table next to the Rakata skull. They combined to make a unique portrait of doom.

Master Ketu drew in breath. "We must get ready immediately. We don't know when the Rakata are coming, but they're on their way."

Tasha looked to her uncle. His head was bowed and he was lost in thought. She said, "I won't surrender. But realistically, what can we do?"

What can I do, she thought. She was just a journeyer, not yet a full Je'daii, and no warrior besides. She'd always sought wisdom in archives and truth in Force-granted visions. Both of them had combined to leave her feeling helpless and defeated.

"We'll muster all Je'daii," said Ketu. "Prepare for a defense of the outer worlds, though it sounds as though Tython will be their final destination."

"They do seek Force-powerful words," Tasha agreed.

"It's not just that," her uncle rasped. With great effort Hawk straightened, looked them in the eye, and said, "We know exactly what the Rakata are coming for. It's the same as what's in the Chasm." He held out a hand and closed it to a half-fist. "Stars on stars. Planets on planets. Infinity in the palm of your hand."

Ketu narrowed his eyes. "Whatever lies inside the Chasm, it's too dangerous to investigate now. Not when these... monsters are coming for us."

Or, Tasha thought, it was all the more imperative that they learn the truth. Ketu didn't seem eager to try, her uncle less so. He'd barely escaped the Chasm once with his mind intact. His haunted eyes said there were some revelations they could not afford to know.

She clasped grey hands together to stop them trembling. In a time like this it seemed a weak and petty thing to fall back of the Je'daii credo, but she recited it silently to herself.

There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.

There is no fear, there is power.

I am the heart of the Force.

I am the revealing fire of light.

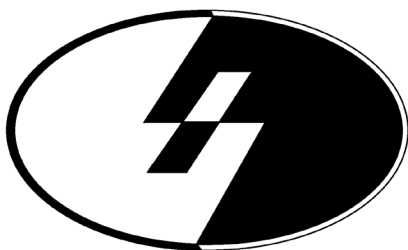
I am the mystery of darkness.

In balance with chaos and harmony,

Immortal in the Force.

The words, drilled into her by her masters, delivered some comfort. If solace would endure in the face of the storm to come, she couldn't say. The Force gave her no answer at all.

PART I



CHAOS AND HARMONY

Chapter One

He put on his armor one piece at a time. First came the gauntlets that stretched from knuckles to elbow. Both were colored scarlet but one was plasteel, one cortosis. Next came the pieces over the abdomen, and then the chest, still scarlet, fitted firmly over black bodysuit. Then the double-layered shoulder pads, and the draping auburn cape. And, finally, the most important piece of all: the silver cylinder of a lightsaber, affixed at the belt.

Ganner Krieg took the image of a perfect Imperial Knight, but he felt like a lie.

He stood among the line of two dozen Knights gathered in the secure hangar room within the government palace on Coruscant. Soon they would file into the waiting airspeeder and join Marasiah Fel at the inauguration of the Galactic Federation's new senate. The empress had insisted on having her most senior Knights present for the occasion and had explicitly invited Ganner. He appreciated her trust but was in no way eager to stand in front of the thousands of holocams that would record the event. He had the armor and the lightsaber but not the Force, and it was hard to think of himself like a real Knight. It was even harder, knowing that all this was his fault.

When he'd first lost the Force- when he'd been kidnapped by Darth Maladi, injected with her midichlorian-deforming virus, and returned to Coruscant to spread the disease to all his friends and comrades- regret had consumed him. He'd lost the desire to go on and nearly taken his own life; now he

did everything possible to avoid looking back, lest he lose himself again in that despairing void.

Even without the Force, the man behind him sensed his thoughts. “Chin up, Ganner,” said Antares Draco. “You can’t look gloomy for the empress.”

Your wife, Ganner thought. “I’ll do my best to smile for the cameras,” he said without humor.

“This is an important day. We need to be strong for her.”

“I know that, and I’ll do what I need to.”

Another voice said behind him, “What you’ll need to do is stand behind the podium like a statue for a few hours. Nothing more.”

Ganner turned to see Azlyn Rae approach. Like Antares, he wouldn’t have been able to endure recent months without her. A former Jedi apprentice who’d found refuge with the Imperial Knights, Azlyn stood apart from the others both for her history and her appearance. A near-fatal fight with Darth Krayt on Had Abbadon had left her with scars on her face and a modified suit of red armor that included a respiration system to replace her ruined lungs. After Had Abbadon, Ganner had stood with her to help reshape her broken body and wounded mind. Lately she’d been returning the favor and helped him deal with the harm Maladi had inflicted.

But even friendship, from a person he cared deeply about, was not enough. He needed the Force to be whole.

Antares was a stalwart and true Knight, and he’d never fully trusted Azlyn for her mixed allegiances. Today, though, he seemed glad to have her present. “Master Rae is right, Ganner. We’re essentially going to be decorations. Today is about Sia and the Senate. As it should be.”

“Exactly.” Azlyn crossed arms beneath her respirator. “After facing the Sith, are elected senators really that hard? I doubt it.”

“I’m sure Sia would say they’re just as dangerous, but in a different way.” Antares said. “Alliance sympathizers still outnumber our senators almost three to one. It’s not something Sia would have allowed, but Stazi forced her hand when she was weak.”

“In all the time I’ve known her, the empress has been very good at projecting strength.”

“She has to be. The Alliance senators will eat her up like piranha-beetles if they think she’s weak.”

“It can’t be as bad as all that,” Ganner said. “And are they really *Alliance* senators? I thought we’re all a Federation now.”

“Ideally, yes,” said Azlyn. “But practically, a lot of those new senators got elected *because* they stood against Krayt, *and* against Roan Fel. In their minds, and the minds of the electorate, they’re Alliance.”

It was likely true; recent events had emboldened members of the former Alliance within the government. Darth Maladi’s artificial virus has swept across the galaxy, deforming midi-chlorians of all those it infected. The disease had been released to target Force-users across the stars, with a special focus on the Jedi and Imperial Knights on Coruscant. Other more obscure orders had been infected as well; not even Maladi’s former allies in the Sith were spared. Despite using every effort to secure Maladi and her laboratory hidden in the Gree Enclave, the Sith had destroyed her lab and herself, taking with it all hope for an easy cure. Since then the galaxy’s best biologists had been gathered, but none had produced an antigen or even a vaccine. On Coruscant, only Marasiah had been spared Force-blindness. Her distant cousin Cade Skywalker had also escaped the effects, and while apparently this had something to do with their shared ancestry, scientists had yet to use this to help the others.

Cut off from the Force, the Jedi Order had withdrawn officially from the triumvirate set up after Darth Krayt’s defeat. In a show of union and generosity, Marasiah and Stazi had agreed to continue using Jedi as official arbiters, but the Jedi Council had insisted that, without the Force speaking to it, it had no place ruling the Federation.

So it was down to Marasiah and Stazi. Marasiah, inheritor of the Empire, had the military and bureaucracy behind her. Stazi had the people and a cadre of devout, potentially dangerous loyalists. Her Imperial Knights, stripped of the Force, had fallen back to a role more ceremonial than actual. Stazi had pressed his advantage and gained concessions, increasing the senate’s authority and getting permission for

many Alliance partisans to run for office. A disturbing amount of them had been elected, even as they vowed the senate itself was a sham justification of Imperial dictatorship.

"There's plenty to worry about," Ganner muttered. "The Federation is supposed to be a unity government, but that only works if people *want* to be unified."

"Nobody wants another big war," Azlyn said.

"No, they want what they want and unity isn't usually the first thing on the list. It's just a means to an end, and most people care more about ends than means."

"You've gotten cynical, Ganner," Antares remarked. "Sia's said that politics is about forcing the ideal from the actual."

"She would know. She's been groomed for this since she was born."

To rule her father's Empire, perhaps. A galaxy-spanning union, mostly populated on worlds that had fought *against* Roan Fel a decade ago, was something more complicated. Ganner envied Marasiah for her poise and determination. He certainly didn't envy her responsibilities.

Azlyn looked around the hangar full of waiting Knights. "I suppose if anyone tried anything today we'll be ready. The good thing about Imperial Knights is that we're not *just* statues."

Ganner wasn't sure of that. All his years of training in combat, espionage, and other skills had used the Force and their foundation; without the Force, he wasn't sure if the skills remained.

Antares seemed more confident. With a grim smile he said, "If they want to try something, let them try. We'll be ready."

The sight warmed Ganner. It recalled the Antares he'd known in younger years: impetuous, devout, and frequently frustrated when there was no outlet for his ardor. Antares had changed since the end of the way against Krayt. He'd become less vocal about his passions and was given to sullen moods. Marrying Marasiah hadn't changed that, nor had losing the Force. It was something else, and Ganner supposed it had something to do with his failure to protect Roan Fel from that Sith assassin on the *Jagged Fel*. The man had always defined himself by his unflagging devotion to the

Empire's ruler; failing to save his emperor was a pain that might never go away.

But despite their differences, Ganner and Antares had one thing in common. Duty was their last defense against a life of silence to the Force.

When the door to the hangar slid open and the empress appeared, the Knights hurried into two straight lines, forming a scarlet aisle down which the empress could walk to her ship. Ganner stood between Azyln and Antares as Marasiah Fel approached. In a white dress with thin gold-metal crowd across her forehead, she looked regal without being ostentatious, and the sight of her gave Ganner needed assurance. In her three years as empress she'd proven even-handed and fair, a leader worth serving. She, Ganner, and Antares had also trained together, and though it was a slightly unbecoming way for a Knight to think of his empress, he considered Marasiah a friend.

There wasn't much in the galaxy Ganner could believe in now, but he believed in her. As she passed she gave him the tiniest nod, and it infected him with confidence.

When she stepped into the airspeeder her Knights fell in behind her, orderly and eager. Today was not about them; they were only here to show strength. For their empress, they'd show it, as they always had. Against so much change, it was a comforting certainty.

Morning in Galactic City. Steel towers rose from mile-deep canyons and speared toward the cloudless sky, and billions of beings traversed the glittering sprawl through millions of speeders passing amongst the maze of towers in lines of orderly traffic. One could almost believe the traffic never ceased and the towers never fell. It was a comforting illusion.

Nearly three years had passed since the battle to liberate Coruscant from Darth Krayt, and a massive reconstruction project had covered up many ugly scars that had deformed the global cityscape. Though there was still work to be done, the project had reached a climax with the creation of a great rotunda for the newly-created senate of the Galactic Federation. The broad dome rose a kilometer due south of the governing palace complex, from a relative low point in

the cityscape that had once contained the senate hall for the Galactic Alliance.

Krayt had demolished the hall- and the senate- less than a year after seizing power. As part of the treaty that ended the war, Empress Marasiah Fel had promised a new senate and new hall to be established within three years of the war's end, and she'd kept her promise. Some had wanted the new rotunda to be an exact replica of the one Krayt her destroyed, but Marasiah's advisors, proud Imperials to a one, had warned against indulging in pro-Alliance nostalgia. She'd agreed, and approved a design that was more humble, with less adornments than the old Alliance hall, but with a larger footprint. This allowed for more seats and more senators from sectors all across the galaxy, including those formerly aligned with both the Alliance and the Empire. Thus Marasiah could claim that she was presiding over an electorate more vast and unified than anything since the Old Republic nearly two centuries ago.

The size of the assembly was without question. The unity was about to be put to the test.

Marasiah began the inaugural session with a convocation speech. It started, of course, with talk of unity and praise to all newly-elected members of the august body. Inflating egos in her audience was expected, even perfunctory. Once she was done with it, Marasiah began outlining the specific powers they were being invested with. Senators and their subcommittees were being given considerably authority in local affairs, as well as with drawing up budgets and outlining policy. Some things were still beyond their reach, notably final command of the military and the guidelines for devolution of power among Federation sectors.

All of this was according to the agreement she'd reached with Gar Stazi, who stood at the rear of the central platform in the blue and gold uniform of a Galactic Alliance admiral. The choice of dress was itself a bold statement, all the more because he hadn't stated his intention to wear it in advance. Marasiah could hardly object, not when the platform was also occupied by Imperial Knights dressed in full scarlet. It was clearly a calculated show of strength on Stazi's part, meant to remind everyone of his role as the Alliance's lead

defender for nearly a decade. It also reminded that this senate was convening on terms closer to Stazi's than Marasiah's.

As she stood on the podium Marasiah felt the bristling emotions crammed into the audience chamber. Sitting side-by-side were Alliance partisans, devout Imperials, stolid pragmatists and speakers for a hundred minor factions that had done everything to stay neutral in the past decade's wars. Her father would have argued that democracy was an invitation to anarchy. Stazi insisted that any government that did not rule by decree of those governed could not be legitimate. As she delivered her speech and soaked in the senators' collective Force-essence, Marasiah was grasped by the conviction that both were right.

After she was finished she stepped aside to let Stazi give a speech of his own. The admiral could rally a crowd with charismatic words; he'd have never led a guerilla war for nearly a decade without those skills. Yet here he was understated and serious, his uniform more triumphalist than any of his words. When he was done he stepped aside and yielded the podium to Marasiah. She called the senate to its first order of business: electing a speaker who would manage regular sessions. Senators would put forward their candidacies today and vote three days later, and once Marasiah began the process she stepped away from the podium to watch.

With so many new members to the electorate it had been impossible to familiarize herself with all of them, but her uncle Hogrum, who acted as her intelligence chief, had briefed her on the most noteworthy representatives. Of the senators who submitted themselves as candidates, there were no surprises. Brant Eldon of Bastion represented the heart of Imperial space, and no other senators from traditionally Imperial sectors arose to split that voting block. Sark Rey'lya of Bothawau, ambitious but pragmatic, also made a stand. So did Nel Kormesh of Eriadu, another moderate. Tem Brighton of Rhinnal was a different story; the man had been an Alliance senator and anti-Imperial hawk before the war and had spent nearly a decade in a Sith labor camp. With all those credentials, and a pugnacious attitude besides, it was no surprise the middle-aged human stood to represent the

Alliance radicals in the senate. The amount of applause he received was disheartening, but Marasiah let nothing show on her face.

The only surprise was in who did not stand. Porat Derrol, a Chagrian who'd fought in Stazi's guerrilla fleet during the war, was said to be charismatic and ambitious, but he'd apparently stood down in favor of Brighton. So did Monia Gahan, another of Stazi's soldiers, who was also the neice of an Alliance triumvir murdered by Darth Krayt. Marasiah watched them both as the other senators gave candidacy speeches; neither betrayed their intentions, but she knew they had the stories and support to sway many votes.

Once the candidates had made their announcements, Marasiah directed the senate to other matters, and Monia Gahan was the first to rise and speak.

"It is an honor to speak to you today," she began. "It's an honor to *be* here, celebrating the return of democracy galactic government."

Her tone had been restrained, but the words were enough to draw more than half of the senators to their feet, applauding or giving their species' equivalent thereof. Marasiah, of course, allowed no response. When she glanced sidelong at Stazi she saw only a smile on his flat green face.

When the cheers died down, Gahan said, "I am also honored to be gathered with you in such a majestic convocation center. It's as splendid as the old Alliance senate hall in which my father presided. Over the past three years, the Federation government had done a splendid job rebuilding Coruscant and covering up the scars left by the Sith."

Marasiah heard the reservation in her voice and knew what came next. "It's good to have an august capital," Gahan continued, "But the goal of government should always be to take care of its people. As senator elected to represent the survivors of my homeworld's genocide, I'm sad to stand before you and insist that not enough had been done to help them. Hundreds of millions of my kind are still left wandering the galaxy as refugees. The government has promised to prepare new worlds for us to settle on, but as yet that hasn't materialized. Their voices must be heard and their

problems addressed. Not when the senate elects it speaker, not next week or tomorrow, but *today*.”

That got her another standing ovation, only slightly smaller than last time. Marasiah took issue with Gahan’s claims; the triumvirate had pushed billions of credits toward helping refugees from Dac. If they hadn’t established a world for them it wasn’t for lack of trying. As much as other planets sympathized with the plight of the Mon Calamari and Quarren, they dug in their heels and protested at the suggestion they give up their oceans.

Marasiah glanced at Stazi again and found the Duro had stepped right beside her. Leaning close and speaking softly he said, “If she wants action today, there’s only one place it can come from.”

He was right; the senate wouldn’t be fully functional until it elected a speaker. The clamor from the crowd kept going and was taking an angry tint. Marasiah knew there was only one option, and in a way it was fortuitous.

She stepped up to the podium and raised her hands, and eventually the senators quieted down. “I will not deny Senator Gahan’s point,” she said. “Much still needs to be done to help the survivors from Dac. Much of it will be done by the senate, including the continual allocation of funds as needed.” Unsurprisingly, the senators started grumbling at the reminder. She raised her voice and added, “However, action can still be taken today. Using my vested authority, I hereby announce the creation of a select committee that will find a new world for Dac’s survivors. As empress you have my guarantee that within one year, we will begin settling refugees in its oceans, and the civilization the Sith tried to destroy will be rebuilt there.”

That earned Marasiah her own round of applause. Senators from Imperial sectors started it, but others joined in. When Monia Gahan signaled her approval with the nod, the wash of senators from Alliance sectors joined the ovation.

She’d done a good thing, but Marasiah could hardly be pleased with the circumstances. “Did you set this up with your pilot?” she asked as Senator Gahan took her seat.

“No,” Stazi said, “But it turns out war teaches some skills that are easily applied to politics.”

The admiral had amply demonstrated that. Her father had called politics war through peaceful means. Her uncle, even more cynical, had recently described it as the beings trying to coerce others to give them what they wanted. They weren't wrong, but politics was necessary, and it could accomplish great things. If she didn't believe that, she'd have never allowed for the creation of a senate at all.

Marasiah only hoped her promise would be half as easy to carry out as it had been to make.

After the war against Krayt, Gar Stazi had thought that there was no fight so difficult he couldn't handle it. Joining the Federation triumvirate had been an education. As a soldier he'd often looked down on politicians as weak-willed and indecisive, more concerned with currying favors than protecting the Alliance. He'd come to understand that the campaigns they waged were even more complicated than an admiral's, and despite their lack of flash they could be just as important.

Stazi felt that acutely as he stepped inside Porat Derrol's apartment, located in one of the residential skyscrapers built to house the new senators. The homes in this high-rise were of standardized design, but he was immediately impressed by how much character Derrol had added to his. The walls and carpet were a soft blue-green recalling the waters of Champala. The tables and chairs had been fused from glass and light-fixtures hanging from the ceiling were sculpted like sea-flowers.

"You've done a wonderful job with the décor," Stazi told Derrol as he shook the young Chagrian's hand.

"I have my wife to thank for that," Derrol smiled, bearing two sharp canines. "She wanted a place where we could feel at home."

The senator led Stazi through the living room and into the dining room, where a number of familiar beings were already gathered. Tem Brighton sat at the table's head, flanked on either side by Senators Nelloran from the Senex sector and Kaige from Chandrilla, hunched together in conversation. Monia Gahan- now senator, once Rogue Squadron ace- stood

slightly apart, and Stazi wondered if the aquatic décor reminded her of her too much lost homeworld.

The one being Stazi didn't recognize, he could easily guess. The young Chagrian woman was slim and attractive. Her deep blue skin contrasted slightly with Derrol's teal hue and, like all females of her species, she lacked the tall straight horns that jutted from the senator's crown.

Porat Derrol drew her by the hand away from the table. "Admiral Stazi, this is my wife."

"It's an honor to meet you, Madam Derrol." Stazi gave his head a little bow. "I was just telling your husband how impressed I am. You've made this place your own."

"Thank you, that was my intention," she smiled demurely. Her husband was quite young for a senator but she looked younger still. "It's good to finally meet you, Admiral. You've always been Porat's hero."

Stazi smiled to hide discomfort; as the Alliance's flag-bearer during the war he'd been a hero everyone in this room, and they expected him to be their hero still. Politics, as he'd learned, muddled simple narratives.

Derrol and his wife directed Stazi to a seat at the end of the table opposite Brighton. Once he sat down the others did too, and the meeting was joined. Brighton folded his hands and looked across the tabletop at Stazi. His careworn face creased to a smile. "It's good to see you, Admiral. I'm glad you accepted my invitation."

Stazi simply nodded. Derrol hadn't explicitly told him that one of the four candidates for senate speaker would be present. He'd asked Stazi to join him for a talk with several 'allies,' and the admiral had guessed from there. That was another reason he disliked politics; discretion demanded so much go unsaid.

As if reading the Duros' mind, Brighton said, "I know you're a soldier at heart, and you like to get to the point of things. So I'll say it simply. Everyone here had agreed to support my campaign for senate speaker. They're confident they could pull votes from others and create a strong voting bloc aligned with Alliance values. We'd like to know how much support we can expect from you."

Stazi gave the man credit; he got to the point. "My authority is totally separate from the new legislature's," he said. "Neither I nor Empress Fel are allowed to act on it. That's why you're electing a speaker in the first place."

"We know that, Admiral," said Senator Kaige. Whereas Brighton's harsh wartime experience showed on his face, the Chandrillan woman had a gentler demeanor. "But more than two-thirds of the senators come from worlds that used to be Alliance. All of them will be looking to you for guidance. Unofficially, we were hoping you could make clear which candidate best promotes Alliance values."

Stazi took a breath. "The Alliance, if you recall, had something of a values problem in its final years. Many planets stood against Imperial aggression and fought valiantly. Others seceded or refused to bring troops into our fight."

"Like Eriadu," Derrol said pointedly. "It will be interesting to see what line Senator Kormesh walks in his campaign."

"Indeed. And there were others, like the Bothans and Rey'lya, who stood with Coruscant unenthusiastically. So I'm afraid when you speak about 'Alliance values,' I have a hard time remembering what they actually were." Half the table opened mouths to object, and Stazi held a hand to stop them. "Further, this is *not* the Alliance senate. The Imperial sectors have a sizable presence and they'll have to be accommodated, one way or another."

"They'll all vote for Senator Eldon," said Nelloran. The Nosaurian clacked his beak in disdain. "The Imperials are smart enough to present a united front. We have to do the same."

"That still leaves Rey'lya and Kormesh," Monia Gahan said.

"They can split the vote between so-called 'moderates,'" insisted Nelloran, disdain heavy on the final word.

"Unless one of them bows out, in which case the other has best chance to win," added Kaige.

Even among comrades there were testy disagreements. Stazi kept his eyes on Brighton, who said, "Right now, we have to believe the race will be between myself and Senator Eldon. The Imperials are less than a third of the senate. We cannot let them wrest control of the legislature. It would be

as good as surrendering to them a second time. And we know you don't surrender, Admiral."

Well played, Stazi thought. "Of course I don't, and I also want to see the preservation of Alliance values, as you speak of them. But this is fundamentally a coalition government. I've been watching Marasiah Fel very closely. As far as I can tell she's had no contact with Senator Eldon. I don't expect her to do anything to prop up his campaign."

"She doesn't need to. The Imperials obey their leaders slavishly," said Nelloran. "It's what *makes* them Imperials."

"So you're saying Alliance free-thinking is our biggest weakness?" asked Monia.

The Nosaurian blinked. "A strength in one situation can be a weakness in another. You're the tactician, Admiral. Don't you agree?"

"I do," Stazi admitted. "But that's all beside the point. If we're to preserve peace in this galaxy, we have to preserve the coalition government. That means we maintain a situation where Alliance and Imperials can continue to work together."

"Does that mean you'll support Rey'lya or Kormesh?" Derrol asked in disbelief.

Their pragmatism, Stazi thought, might sustain a coalition better than Brighton's idealism, but he couldn't say that. "My point is that I cannot be seen to take sides. As long as the Empress avoids it, so will it."

"Admiral, we're not asking you to do anything officially, or publicly," Brighton said patiently. "We're merely asking what you can do *quietly*. Simply talking with a few senators in private, swaying them to our cause, could tip the election in our favor."

"There's little I can do quietly nowadays. Nor you, either. You should expect word of this meeting to start spreading around the rumor-mills."

"I'm prepared for that," Brighton nodded. "So are you, if you came here."

"The purpose of this meeting was not fully explained. But if I *keep* getting spotted at meetings with your allies, or hopeful allies, it damages my credibility. And it damages that of the entire government."

“Letting Imperials take full control would hurt it even more,” insisted Derrol. “And do you *really* believe Fel won’t help other Imperials?”

“I believe Marasiah Fel is an honorable woman,” Stazi said honestly. “She’s Imperial enough to be hard-headed and dictatorial, but at least she tries to be fair. I trust her far more than her father. I was able to get her to concede more power to the senate than I expected, and I don’t intend for those powers to fall back into Imperial hands. But I can’t act here, publicly or privately. I’m sorry.”

He watched expressions wilt across the table, all except for Brighton, who still kept admirable aplomb. “I respect your position, Admiral. I just hope it doesn’t cost us the senate.”

“So do I,” Stazi said.

He took no joy in any of this. He knew Brighton had suffered greatly for his belief in democracy. Derrol and Gahan had fought fearlessly in his renegade fleet. Nelloran had gone to prison and Kaige had lost several family members to Krayt’s killers. These were good beings, and if there had been more of them in the Alliance a decade ago, maybe the Empire wouldn’t have won the war.

Just thinking those thoughts made him sick inside. If the Imperial bloc really did take control of the senate, he’d regret sticking so close to the rules.

Stazi exhaled. “I can’t canvas on your behalf. However... am I willing to offer advice. Quietly. Privately.” He looked around the table. “Preferably to only one of you. Another one of these big gatherings and the rumors will be impossible to stop.”

Relief showed through. He was expecting Monia to volunteer, but Derrol raised a hand first. “I’d be honored to liaise with you, Admiral.”

“Thank you, Senator. I can’t promise my advice will be useful-”

“I’m sure it will, Admiral.”

The admiration was back on their faces. It made Stazi uncomfortable again. “I can recommend strategies, and maybe share information about other campaigns, but in the end you’ll have to win this election by yourselves.”

“We’re just glad to have your help, Admiral,” Brighton said. “After all, none of us would be here if it weren’t for you.”

Flattery was all the harder when it was true. Putting on one more smile Stazi said, “Thank you. Is there anything else for now?”

“No, Admiral. I think we’ve kept you long enough to stir the rumor mill.”

“When you want to be in touch, sir, you can contact our apartment directly,” Derrol said. “Saarai, get the admiral our contact information before you show him out.”

“Of course,” his wife rose and slipped out of the room.

By the time Stazi got to his feet she was back, holding a tiny datacard. The admiral exchanged short farewells with everyone at the table, then followed her through the living room to the door.

“Thank you so much for helping us, Admiral,” she said as she pressed the datacard into his hand. “Porat was sure we could count on you.”

“I’d be a poor admiral if I let my soldiers down.”

She nodded, gave his hand a short squeeze, and released. As he stepped out of the apartment and hurried corridor, Stazi’s thoughts lingered on her soft blue face. Despite her youth and innocent expression, she’d paid close attention the whole meeting. Some politicians kept their jobs and families separate. For better or worse, Derrol didn’t seem to be one of them. Whether that would help or harm their cause remained to be seen.

Stazi was relieved to step outside onto the high-rise’s landing platform, into the gathering dark and rising light of Galactic City. He took a breath and released. Being with so many senators brought back memories of his sparring with Alliance leadership during the war, though barring Monia’s father they’d treated him far differently. When faced with the convoluted obligations of politics, space combat seemed downright simple. Sometimes he even missed the days of fight-and-run against Krayt.

Yet despite it all, he didn’t miss them now. Politics was convoluted and conflicting and usually aggravating, but it was a sign the galaxy was returning to normal. That Alliance

patriots were able to make election schemes was a better sign still. Many good friends had died to make an evening like this possible.

Strange as the night had been, it gave Stazi hope.

Chapter Two

The planet of Manpha was unimpressive in every respect. Though it sat on the Corellian Trade Spine it was at the outermost edge. The primitive, amphibious natives had only reluctantly been dragged into the galactic economy, and the sparsest traffic moved in and out of the system. Seen from orbit was a drab sphere, mottled by swampy greens and browns.

It was for those very reasons that Darth Nihl had chosen it as the starting point of his campaign; that, and its proximity to Saijo, his birth-planet and the main colony world of his people, the Nagai. More than a century ago his race of pale-skinned, black-haired humanoid warriors had been chased from their native star cluster by another warlike people. The Nagai had seized Saijo, Manpha, and dozens of other worlds in their quest for living space, only to be beaten off most of them by the fledgling New Republic. Less than fifteen years ago, Nihl himself had led his renascent people to recapture their former glory.

That was to say, the man he'd been had led them. The Alliance and Imperials had crushed Relik K'sharn and his war fleet at Terminus, and the beaten warlord had survived only because the One Sith had plucked him from the wreckage of his ship and brought him to Korriban, where he'd begun his education in power greater than anything he'd imagined.

Though he no longer had the Force, Nihl still possessed the wisdom he'd gained in Darth Krayt's service. He had learned his lessons, and this time he would do it right.

When the Nagai fleet dropped out of hyperspace over Manpha, Nihl was standing at the fore of the bridge on his flagship *Krish'nakt*. It was not the largest ship in the fleet, but massed less than half of a standard Imperial star destroyer; instead it was a swift and deadly vessel, and Nihl felt confident on its deck as he watched the rest of the fleet swarm ahead toward Manpha. No two Nagai warships were identical, and he knew their cobbled-together, mis-matched appearance tended to confuse the enemy. Better still, it led them to underestimate the Nagai, something Nihl was counting on for his new campaign.

For today, however, shock and awe were the priorities. Manpha possessed a handful of orbital defense platforms, which the Nagai quickly targeted. Their ships were small and fast and maneuverable, and the turbolaser blasts they couldn't evade, they absorbed. Missiles arced from the attacking ships and quickly overwhelmed the stations' defenses. As Manpha swelled to fill the entire bridge viewport, Nihl saw explosions light up like a loose garland around its waist.

"Six stations destroyed, Lord," reported a voice behind him.

Nihl turned from the beautiful destruction to see Darth Vurik. With his bald dome laced with elaborate black and red Sith tattoos the Sakiyan stood out against a crew of monochrome Nagai. The surviving members of the One Sith were sparse and he'd spread them thinly in command positions throughout the fleet. Since the death of Lord Krayt, Nihl had been steadily building connections with those on Saijo who saw Relik K'sharn's defeat a decade ago as something to be avenged. When the Force had been suddenly stolen from them by Maladi's virus, Nihl had resolved to stand firm and continue his original plan. The Force's silence had, in fact, added urgency to his conquest.

"Has anything launched from the surface?" Nihl asked Vurik.

"Not yet, Lord. We don't believe they got any communications through our jamming field either."

"Excellent."

Nihl stalked away from the viewport to the tactical display holo, which showed the Nagai fleet scattering wide to form a

blockade around Manpha. It was a very loose net, but Nagai ships were fast, and they'd be able to intercept any vessel that tried to run. As he and Vurik watched, the holo marked a handful of ships trying to do just that, but they were immediately intercepted by the closest Nagai. Some were destroyed and the rest fell back to the surface.

"They've been cowed quickly," Vurik muttered.

"The natives aren't warriors. They surrendered easily last time," Nihl said.

Remembering his last campaign with the Nagai brought mixed feelings. After gaining the wisdom of the Sith he couldn't help but see Relik K'sharn as fatally arrogant. His ambitions had far outstripped his powers and he'd gotten most of his navy destroyed because of it. Yet K'sharn's compulsion to conquer and dominate had passed strong to Nihl. After fifteen years he was wiser and stronger. Even without the Force, he believed that was true. Even if he could no longer command that universal power, he was still Sith.

Like the Jedi and Imperial Knights, they all had to believe it, or they were lost.

"Tell our forward units to begin launching landing teams, but hold them in the upper atmosphere," Nihl told the tactical officers. "Move *Or'dath* and *T'kalth* into lower orbit over their capital and prepare an orbital barrage."

His crew complied quickly. Some manning the new Nagai was fleet were veterans of K'sharn campaigns. Others were younger warriors who yearned to avenge past grievance. There were many on Saijo, too, who'd had their fill of conquest a decade ago and wanted the Nagai to stay on their homeworld in peace. Nihl and his allies had put much effort over the past three years into silencing them and whipping the people into a war-hungry fighting force.

Within ten minutes, the landing teams were holding in the atmosphere and *Or'dath* and *T'kalth* were ready to deliver their punishing blows. Darth Nihl stalked over to the communications station and said, "Prepare a broadcast to the planet on all frequencies. Drop the local jamming field over Manpha."

It took the crew less than a minute to comply. When they were ready, Nihl bent close to the audio grille and said, "This

is Relik K'sharn, warlord of the Nagai. This world was ours twice before. We have come to reclaim it. If you recognize our authority you will be welcomed into our new union of Outer Rim peoples. If you resist, we will rain punishment on your world that will make our past conquests look like child's games. You have one standard minute to surrender before we open fire. Please respond promptly."

He stood back and waited. Vurik appeared at his shoulder and said, "They're probably trying to call for help."

"Even if it gets through our jamming, the nearest Federation base is sectors away. They will fall."

The interesting part of this would be seeing what reaction Manpha's conquest got on Coruscant. He'd waited to launch his campaign until the Federations' senate was inaugurated. The brand-new body had been cobbled together from pieces of the Alliance, the Empire, and other smaller entities, and most of those represented wouldn't give a damn about a few Outer Rim worlds being conquered. Eventually Coruscant would have to take notice, but Nihl was relying on the fractured senate hampering a clear response.

A minute passed. "No reply, Lord," said the comm officer.

"Then tell *Or'dath* and *T'kalth* to open fire."

The young Nagai complied without hesitation. Nihl glanced out the viewport, but *Krish'nakt* was too far away to spot anything more than tiny flashes on Manpha's surface. With each flare thousands were dying beneath the guns of a Sith-led army. Nihl felt a swell of the pride; it had been far too long.

After a few volleys Nihl said, "Tell them to hold fire. Wait two minutes for a response."

It took less than one. The comm officer reported, "Manpha's government is offering unconditional surrender. They're... requesting we be merciful."

Nihl's grinned. The Sith and Nagai- both his peoples- had spent too long cowering before other powers. It was time to reclaim some of their lost dominance.

"Tell them we will respect their wishes. Have *Or'darth* and *T'kalth* hold position and hold fire. Send the landing teams in."

"Yes, Lord," the officer said eagerly.

Nihl looked over to Vurik. The Sakiyan's face was a hard mask but his eyes were bright and eager. This planet was unremarkable and the victory small, but it had been a victory, and they'd been waiting too long for that. They deserved a moment to savor it.

Once the moment passed, they'd prepare for the war to come.

When the landing ships reached Manpha's surface, they disgorged tens of thousands of armed Nagai troops. Many secured the local government and military headquarters. Many more were sent to parade through the capital's streets, silently and proudly proclaiming their dominance for a shocked and frightened populace that had never imaged they'd end this day under an occupying power.

Not a single Sith went down to join the occupying force. Darth Havok read many things into that. For a start, Lord Nihl wasn't ready to make public the Sith's role in this conquest. Truth would out eventually, but the revelation might unite the squabbling factions on Coruscant, and that was the opposite of what they wanted. It also spoke to the new status of the Sith; in Krayt's day they'd have proudly paraded their black-and-red bodies before a subject population. Now they were few, and worse, crippled by their deafness to the Force. They had to plan differently and command differently, acting from shadows, bringing down their enemies by subterfuge as had the Sith of old.

Darth Nihl was a former warlord, and subterfuge was not his specialty. Sending too many Sith to the Floating World to kill Darth Wredd had nearly brought down their order. Havok had argued against it, and in the wake of that disaster some Sith had spoken quietly about ousting Nihl. The curse of Maladi's disease had banished that talk. In that time of confusion Nihl had offered strength, certainty, and purpose as only conquest could bring. The Sith had fallen in line behind his plan, Havok included, but the Iktotchi had hoped the Dark Lord might add something subtle to his strategy.

Havok chose to take it as an encouraging sign that he'd been summoned to Nihl's flagship. After leaving the vessel he'd commanded at Manpha, his shuttle docked in

Krish'nakt's hangar and a group of black-and-white Nagai escorted him to the Dark Lord's private command salon at the base of the bridge power.

Nihl was alone, pacing in front of a viewport that looked down on the newly-conquered world. The walls and tables of this room were adorned with a variety of artifacts that bespoke the occupant's character. Most were bladed and deadly weapons, and to Havok's eye they seemed equally split between Sith and Nagai origin. He wondered how carefully Nihl had curated that display, and whether he was sending a message to both groups.

Nihl turned from the viewport to face Havok. After losing touch with the Force, the Sith had also lost the red-gold irises that marked them a drawing from the Force's dark side. Havok disliked reminders of the man he'd been and was discomforted by the sight of his own brown eyes in the mirror. Nihl's had reverted to their natural blood-red, losing nothing of their old ferocity. Havok envied him for that.

Nihl clasped hands behind his thin waist. "You did well commanding today."

"Thank you, Lord" Havok dipped his horns for a small bow.

The Nagai took smooth steps forward. "You've always told me war is more than just blood and fire. You're correct, of course. That's why you'll be taking a different role from now on. As our war continues we'll have to pay close attention to Coruscant. Their reactions will dictate ours. We have agents in the capital, but I want you there to oversee them."

Havok nodded, quietly pleased. The Sith's agents were a mix of actual Lords, now deprived of their power, and hired spies. One spy had been inserted into the medical complex where, for almost a year, the galaxy's best scientist had labored fruitlessly to counteract Maladi's virus. Others had been inserted into military and senatorial staff, though none were as close to the empress or senior politicians as he'd liked. It was an operation in need of expansion.

"Do I have permission to recruit new agents?" he asked.

"Perhaps." Nihl regarded him. "We'll discuss any growth of operations beforehand, and we'll keep in close contact all the while."

"I understand," Havok said, faintly disappointed. He had no desire to usurp control from Nihl; before he'd been Sith he'd been an Imperial Knight, and even after learning way of the dark side he had no compunction with serving another's cause. Still, he'd wished to make the spynet on the capital his own.

"You will go to Coruscant," said Nihl, "But I need you to take care of several other things first. Most importantly, you will go to Mandalore."

Havok felt heavy weight settle inside him. The last time he'd been to the Mandalorian homeworld it had changed his life forever, tipping him from Eshkar Niin to Darth Havok. He's been sent by Roan Fel to discover the new Mandalore's allies. Thinking himself clever, Niin had walked into a Sith trap, but instead of killing him Nihl and the late Darth Vorkan had convinced him that the Sith were necessary to win the war against the Alliance. At the time, Niin had told himself he could use the Sith to preserve Fel's Empire, but in retrospect he saw that they'd snared him right there. From Mandalore everything had been a straight line: his double-agent work for the Sith, his guilt-ridden resignation from the Imperial Knights, his confrontation with the empress and finally the killing of Elliah- whom Eshkar Niin had loved- which had liberated him from his old self and allowed Darth Havok to be born.

Mandalore had begun his liberation. It was strange, then, that he revolted from going there.

Swallowing that down Havok said, "What do we need from Yaga Auch's?"

"Several things. We need his warriors, most of all."

"You want them to fight in our campaign? What about our other allies?"

"They'll help us too," Nihl nodded. "When the Mandalorians start fighting with us, Coruscant will sit up, take note, and maybe even take action. But all they'll expect are Nagai and Mandalorians. *Then* our new allies will overwhelm them."

Havok felt relieved. Nihl was the Dark Lord, and he'd been foolish to doubt his strategy. The Nagai went on, "Auchs also needs to be reminded who put him in power. Be

charitable. Assume that, when his agents helped Maladi spread her virus, they didn't know what she was doing. But make clear that, even unwittingly, he's done the Sith great damage, and he must make recompense."

"Are you sure you don't want Auchs removed?"

"I've thought on that, but no. These Mandalorians are hard to control. Remove him and it might start a war, and there's no guarantee the new Mandalore will work with us. We need to keep Auchs where he belongs, under our heel." Nihl smiled, bearing sharp teeth. "After all, he killed the last *Mand'alor*. We have proof of that. Unless he wants his crime laid bare, he'll do as we ask."

Blackmail was a crude thing, but it usually worked. "I'll make that clear to Auchs. Should I set him to contact you directly?"

"Yes, but only once you make sure he understands the situation."

"Even with what he have on him, he'll want money."

"And he'll get some from our account on Muunilinst. But don't spend too freely, Havok."

The Iktotchi nodded; the Sith had amassed fantastic wealth during Krayt's reign, but the Federation had done an impressive job finding and seizing their liquid assets. They had money to spend, but not as much as they'd have liked.

"Am I to go to Coruscant after that?" he asked.

"Handle Mandalore for now," Nihl said. "I may have more for you later."

Havok nodded again. He knew the Dark Lord kept secrets, as he deserved to. His negotiations with their new allies had been almost entirely private. Still, Havok prized knowledge as much as power, and it was always disconcerting to know things were being kept from him.

Nihl saw that and gave another sharp-toothed smile. "Be patient. You're one of our most valuable assets. I won't waste your talents."

"Thank you." He bowed his head, then thought to ask, "Has there been any word from Lord Talon?"

Nihl's smile vanished. He made no secret of his disappointment with the Twi'lek after her failure to capture Maladi alive. He'd sent Talon and her human apprentice on

the hunt for a supposed Force-using Yuuzhan Vong who might be able to show the rest of them how to open to the Force. It seemed to Havok the longest of long shots, but still an avenue worth investigating. For Talon, once Krayt's trusted Hand, the mission was an unmistakable fall from grace.

"Her last reports suggested a lead in the Ciutric system. I can't say whether it will get them anywhere, but they are investigating."

"I understand. And nothing of the Wyyrlok's daughter?"

Nihl shook his head. The traitor's child had disappeared after his death. She'd been naturally powerful but not fully trained, and in any case she'd be as deaf to the Force as the rest of them now. Most likely, Saara was no threat, but after what Maladi had done they were uncomfortable with loose ends.

"You have more important things to concern yourself with," Nihl said, then tilted his head thoughtfully. "Before you go, I think we must do something about your appearance."

Havok tensed. "My tattoos."

"It will be hard for you to move around Coruscant unnoticed with them. For the duration of your field work, they'll have to be removed."

It was no surprise. Several other Sith had had their tattoos taken off before infiltration missions. It was a very painful experience, even moreso than having the tattoos marked, and this time he would not have the Force to lessen the agony.

Havok didn't savor the procedure, and worse would be seeing the brown, unmarked face of Eshkar Niin in the mirror. Having the eyes of the weaker man he'd been was bad enough. He was afraid that, without the constant sight of his scarlet face, he might lose the man he'd become.

That was hardly a doubt he could admit to Nihl. Standing straight, like the loyal servant both Havok and Niin had been, he said, "Of course, Dark Lord. It will be done."

The planet Bakura looked warm and inviting as the Federation diplomatic shuttle fell toward its daylit side. Blue oceans, green continents, and white cloud-swirls suggested a

fertile, living world, uncorrupted by pollution or overpopulation.

Shado Vao, strapped in the back of the cockpit for entry, knew these things were true, but Bakura still had plenty of problems, which was why he was here today. The planet was located far on the Outer Rim, near the edge of the Unknown Regions, which meant he'd had a long outbound flight to review the situation he was being sent to arbitrate.

Since being settled by humans in the days of the Old Republic, Bakura had become a regional industrial center where native minerals were mined and used to manufacture repulsorlift coils. Several times, the planet had been threatened by the saurian Ssi-ruuk, a religiously fanatic race whose technology was fueled by the absorbed life energy of sentient beings, gathered in a process called 'entechment.' Over a century ago, there had been a mass exodus of the P'w'eck, a second saurian species long used as enteched slaves by the Ssi-ruuk. The humans on Bakura had a long history of reticence toward aliens and the P'w'eck were alien indeed, but over time the two species had formed an awkward but effective symbiosis on Bakura. From what Shado had read, this was largely because the P'w'eck had brought with them methods that allowed the Bakurans to produce repulsorlift coils with a seventy percent increase in power efficiency, allowing the United Bakur Corporation to effectively corner the market.

Boosted by mutual economic gains, the awkward alliance between humans and P'w'eck had lasted for over a century. Now there was doubt it would last at all. As the shuttle plunged into Bakura's atmosphere, Shado glanced sideways at his partner on his mission, the Federation diplomat Geral Storr. The grey-haired human had a far more impressive resume than Shado when it came to mediating conflicts; he'd been an envoy for Roan Fel's empire for decades and had helped write the Treaty of Federation itself. Shado, by comparison, had spent most of his adult life running and hiding from Sith hunters.

He couldn't help but feel as though he'd been assigned this mission out of pity. Without the Force to guide them, the Jedi Council had withdrawn from the Federation triumvirate,

but Empress Fel and Admiral Stazi had both insisted the Jedi would have a place within the government. Shado had told the Council he'd be willing to go wherever he was sent, just as when he'd had the Force. The Council's response had been to send him with Storr to Bakura, but as yet he wasn't sure if he was going as a fellow mediator, an attache, or a mere observer.

Once the shuttle pilot finished speaking with local flight control, he pivoted in his chair to look at Shado and Storr. "We've been cleared to land at Salis D'aar spaceport. You'll be escorted straight to the president's office."

"A good start," Storr nodded. "Take us in."

Shado strained in his crash webbing to watch as the shuttle lowered altitude and raced over green fields and sporadic mountain ridges of Bakura's northern continent. A city gleamed on the horizon ahead, and as they drew closer he could see it was a sprawling thing with clusters of skyscrapers and thick lines of speeder-traffic. Bakura was a long way from the Core, but this metropolis seemed as wealthy and modern as anywhere in the galaxy.

Storr was also leaning close for a better look. "Can you see the patches of P'w'eck settlements, Master Jedi?" he said. "Notice the thin spires, and the depleted areas around them."

Shado looked over the cityscape again and saw what the human was talking about. According to the source material he'd been given, the P'w'eck had built their homes on Bakura as they had on the Ssi-ruuvi homeworld: tall, narrow, and glassy spires clustered by the dozens. The style was distinct from the human-made skyscrapers, but more noticeable were the rings of unpaved land around each cluster. It seemed that, even in a city as populous and tight-packed as Salis D'aar, the P'w'eck areas were given careful berth.

The shuttle banked toward a district of lower but elegant building, widely-spaced on green lawns and connected by boulevards lined with statuary. There was something universal about government districts everywhere. As they circled close to a four-set of wide white landing pads, Shado's eyes were drawn to the one pad already occupied. The ship resting there was ovoid, taller than it was wide with

an array of thrusters on one side and a set of three blisters on the opposite, giving it a vague resemblance to an insectoid face.

He said, "It looks like the Ssi-ruuk are already here."

"Quite," Storr said dryly. "Well. At least we won't have to wait long to get talks started."

Their shuttle folded wings and lowered itself onto the landing pad opposite the larger and more intimidating Ssi-ruuvi vessel. As they ran through post-flight cooldown, a small greeting party came onto the pad. All human, Shado noted, and mostly in the blue uniforms of the local defense forces.

Shado and Storr stepped down the landing ramp together, trailed by a handful of guards and aids. The leader of the greeting part snapped a salute and said, "Welcome to Bakura, Master Storr. I'm Lieutenant Envis. Please let me show you to the president's office."

"I'd be happy to speak with him," Storr nodded. "This is Master Shado Vao, of the Jedi Order. He'll be attached to me for the duration of the negotiations."

Envis' eyes flicked to Shado for only a second, then darted away. He'd gotten that fast, almost embarrassed glance a hundred times over the past year. It asked many things at once: whether he'd *really* lost his powers, what good he was without them, and what specifically he thought he could do here.

Shado only had a definite answer to the first one. Best he knew, no Jedi had found an answer to the second two. Before going on this mission Grand Master K'Kruhk had counseled him to continue seeking rightness as he'd when he'd touch the Force. Just because his guide had gone silent didn't make the search any less necessary. It was good advice, as far as it went, and Shado promised himself that he'd continue to look for the Jedi answer to whatever dilemmas he found on Bakura.

After making arrangements to have Shado and Storrs' belongings dropped off at their new accommodations, the two of them followed Envis and his bodyguards through the spaceport complex, into a speeder-cab, and across a stretch of the government district until they reached the wide, white-

walled step pyramid which, Envis explained, housed the executive branch.

Shado had briefed himself on Bakura's government and understood it was an awkward assemblage, with one elected house for the human population and another for the P'w'eck, plus a smaller governing council elected by the Kurtzen, Bakura's native sentients. The planet's population currently stood at some seventy percent human, twenty-eight percent P'w'eck, and a mere two percent Kurtzen, but all three elected bodies were ostensibly given equal footing on the so-called Tripartite Council, where each body cast a single vote. As a result, many humans grumbled their votes counted for one-third on the Council when they had two-thirds of the population. The P'w'eck and Kurtzen, naturally, insisted they needed protection as minority parties.

The end result, based on what Shado had read, seemed to be a mess that produced more locked horns than legislation. Most of the actual governing nowadays came from the executive branch and the president chosen through direct election. Naturally, nobody but a human had ever held that seat.

Envis escorted them to one the highest levels of the executive pyramid, through several security checkpoints, all the way to the president's office. While the vast majority of the beings they passed were human, Shado saw a handful of Kurtzen, humanoids with pure-white skin and bald, wrinkled foreheads. He also saw several P'w'eck: two-meter-tall saurians with long thick tails, powerful lower legs, and brown scaly hides. They'd all worn blue sashes, apparently marking them as part of the defense force. Best Shado could tell, he was the only being in miles who was neither human, Kurtzen, nor P'w'eck.

No, he reminded himself. The Ssi-ruuk were here too, and without firing a shot they'd thrown Bakura's careful balance out of whack.

The president's office was a wide room with a low ceiling and one full wall made of transparisteel to let in the midday light. The man inside was on his feet, and as soon as the door closed behind Shado and Storr he took their hands, one after the other.

“Welcome, Master Storr, Master Jedi,” the man said. He was older than Shado had expected, perhaps seventy standard years. He was shorter, too, and bald except for a fringe of gray, but President Ahnel Recado had light in his eyes and energy in his movement.

“Thank you very much for having us, Mister President,” Storr said. “The Federation is glad you sought our help in arbitrating this case.”

“At this point, Bakura needs any help she can get,” Recado chuckled.

Shado was surprised by the open self-deprecation. “The situation’s troubling,” he said, “But you don’t seem to have had any violence yet. Have you?”

“Violence? We’ve had a few small riots in Salis D’aar and other cities. A few killed.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that.”

“I’m trying to look on the bright side. We could have had much *more* dead. We had massive protests two days ago, when the Ssi-ruuvi delegation arrived. Plenty of violence. Some smashed windows, some burned-out speeders... but no deaths that time.” Recado shrugged. “So I’m cautiously optimistic.”

Shado hadn’t expected a politician to be this blunt, nor this sanguine about his planet’s crisis. “I understand people are angry, given Bakura’s history with the Ssi-ruuk.”

“Frankly, I think they’re *less* angry with the Ssi-ruuk than with the P’w’eck.”

“For not rejecting the Ssi-ruuk offer of unification out of hand?” asked Storr.

“Exactly.” Recado crossed his arms and leaned against the edge of his desk. “You understand, relations between humans and P’w’eck have never been perfect. Naturally our people have collaborated professionally to create our repulsorlift coils. Cooperation has brought Bakura untold economic success. But actual *friendship* between individual humans and P’w’eck have always been rare. In the past few decades, it’s basically become unheard of.”

“I understand Bakurans have never been very accepting of non-humans,” said Shado.

Storr immediately jumped at that. "What Master Vao means to say is that there must have been resistance to integration on both sides."

Recando smirked. "I'm fully away of what Master Vao means to say. And he's right. We welcomed the P'w'eck out of necessity and mutual advantage, but not with open arms. There is a severe gulf between our peoples- culturally, biologically, even *gustatorily*. You'll get a sample of that at the commencement banquet. It's an experience you won't forget, I promise."

"Will the Ssi-ruuk also be at this banquet?" asked Storr.

"Naturally. Delegate Ovipekki is quite an interesting fellow. Three meters tall, scales as blue as the sea, and apparently totally earnest in his insistence that the P'w'eck can now return to the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium as equal partners."

"I understand the Ssi-ruuk have tried that kind of subterfuge before," Shado said. "I'm surprised the P'w'eck are falling for it now."

"I think after a century away from home, the P'w'eck have started looking at their old masters with rose-colored eyelids," Recado said dryly. "Mostly, it speaks to the failure of our people to properly integrate them here."

Again Shado was impressed with his bluntness. "Are the Ssi-ruuk really offering to let the *entire* P'w'eck population immigrate?"

"They're willing to let whoever wants to return to Lhwekk return. This would be much less concerning, you understand, if the movement didn't have support from many of the P'w'eck leaders."

"If the P'w'eck leave, what happens to your repulsorlift factories?"

"That is the question, isn't it? Our industry combines human mining and manufacturing techniques with a special P'w'eck trade secret added in, and I do mean secret. If the P'w'eck leave and take their industry with them, the economic damage to Bakura will be incalculable."

"This assumes the Ssi-ruuvi offer is legitimate," said Storr.

"Yes. I was helping you could shed some light on that."

"Federation Intelligence has been looking into the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium. We have found some interesting develop-

ments, particularly within the past year.” Storr tilted his head. “You did know, Mister President, that there has been some traffic between Bakura and Lhwëkk for most of the past decade, yes?”

Recado nodded. “Yes, we know the P’w’ëck were sending small embassies to the Ssi-ruuk. They always came back, and they always insisted they just conducting basic negotiations, to ensure good relations between our planets. People weren’t thrilled, but they accepted it. There didn’t seem to be anything more until recently.”

Storr nodded. “Our intelligence is incomplete, but approximately six months ago, there seems to have been an upheaval on Lhwëkk.”

Recado straightened. “You mean a revolution?”

“A major shift in government.” Storr paused meaningfully. “We have reports- I’d better call them rumors- that the entechment process that the Ssi-ruuk have relied on has... stopped working.”

“You mean it failed? How?”

“The rumors don’t specify.”

Shado had his own idea, though Storr had warned him against voicing pure conjecture. As there had been direct contact between the Bakuran P’w’ëck and Ssi-ruuk, it was possible the P’w’ëck had passed on Darth Maladi’s virus to the Ssi-ruuk, and from the Ssi-ruuk into whatever enslaved races they were using for entechment. Both saurian species were, by all accounts, blind to the Force and immune to most its effects, but they still existed *in* the Force and their bodies would have been effective carriers for the virus.

Jedi who’d encountered enteched life-forms- the legendary Luke Skywalker first among them- had reported feeling those energies trapped inside the mechanical vessels the Ssi-ruuk imprisoned them in. Shado supposed that Maladi’s virus had affected the life-energy of those prisoners, damaging it so that it could not be passed whole into the Ssi-ruuk’s droids and warships. If this was true, the batteries with which the Ssi-ruuk had powered their evil empire had literally run dry.

That was Shado’s theory, but it was only that, and Storr was probably right that he should keep it to himself. It seemed no

surprise to Shado that the Force's silence should have unpredicted ramifications, even for species who weren't consciously using it.

Recado took a deep breath as he considered Storr's revelation. "If you're right... I can understand why the Ssi-ruuk are panicked."

"Maybe we should take this as a good sign," offered Shado. "The Ssi-ruuvi Imperium has literally been fueled by the lives of subject peoples. That system's been torn down now. That means they have a chance to start again, to remake themselves. Their offer of alliance with the P'w'eck may be the first step in a new, better society on Lhwekk."

Recado regarded him thoughtfully. Storr said, "The Master Jedi is an optimist, even now."

"I try to be," Shado said, and didn't add how hard it was.

"Perhaps you're right," Recado said. "But even then, Lhwekk's gain could still be Bakura's loss. As president, I have to do everything I can to prevent that."

Storr said, "The Federation hopes we can reach a compromise that will benefit everyone- Bakuran, P'w'eck, even Ssi-ruuk, if their transformation is honest."

"That would be ideal. And if Lhwekk's gain is Bakura's loss... at least it might serve the balance."

It was strange sentiment from Bakura's president, but stranger still was the emphasis Recado placed on that last word. Shado's briefing materials noted that Bakura's original settlers had belonged to a faith called the Cosmic Balance, though he was unclear what that religion meant, philosophically or practically.

Recado stood straight. "Gentlemen, I'll let Lieutenant Envis escort you to your quarters. The rest of your team should be settled in now. This evening I'll let you pay visits to the leaders for the Ssi-ruuk and P'w'eck parties. Those are Ovipekakis and Vlothaw, respectively. We'll arrange for translators, of course."

"We have our own," Storr smiled politely. "We know your feelings about droids here, so we brought earpieces."

"I'm glad you respect our customs," Recado smiled back. "Master Storr. Master Jedi. I'll see you later."

There was more running through their conversation than diplomatic nicety. Shado could pick up a lot of it, but he knew he was missing so many undercurrent to both their feelings. Through the Force he'd been able to intuit people and uncover motives they'd hidden, even from themselves. With those skills, the Jedi had won rightful fame as conflict solvers.

Without them he didn't know how good he could be, but he had to try. As he followed Storr out of the office, Shado glanced at his mechanical left arm, which looked as authentic as his flesh-and-bone right one. After losing the limb at Ord Mantell in a futile attempt to capture Mandalorian captain Thorum Rhal, he'd considered leaving that arm cut off at the elbow, as his teacher Wolf Sazen had.

He'd relented after a few months, when the reminder of his failure became too much. Maybe he was just weaker than Master Sazen; he liked to think he was taking Master K'Kruhk's advice to heart and continuing with his life the best he could. The one thing Shado knew for certain was that a limb could be replaced, but there was nothing to make up for the loss of the Force.

Chapter Three

It was the kind of planet ideal for a secluded vacation. The weather was comfortably warm, the oceans vast and blue. The scattered islands were lush with green vegetation and rimmed by white-sand beaches. Best of all, there were no cities, no pollution-puffing landspeeders, no crowds or commerce of any kind.

Lehon was a beautiful world, but there was something *wrong* to it, something only Cade Skywalker could feel. The planet's ancient owners, the brutal Force-wielding empire-builders called Rakata, had apparently gone extinct, but they'd left a miasma of dark side energy behind, one that was especially disquieting when contrasted with the peaceful vista.

Before landing they'd spent hours scouring the planet from low orbit, looking for any other spacecraft or signs of habitation. The most they found were old ruins half-overgrown by the surrounding jungle. When they'd set *Mynock* down on the island with the largest such ruin Cade hadn't been expecting to find much, but at least it gave them a chance to get off the ship and enjoy fresh air and scenery.

Lehon's peaceful beauty was having different effects on his crew, Cade noticed. No surprise, given the assemblage of passengers he'd been dragging across the galaxy for most of the past year, chasing false hopes and empty leads as they searched for Khat Lah, a Yuuzhan Vong warrior who'd somehow gained the ability to use the Force, then vanished in a quest to learn more about the ancient Jedi.

His long-time partners Deliah Blue and Jariah Syne had never been Jedi or anything close. With characteristic practicality, they'd decided to enjoy the island coast for the sunny beach it was. Jariah had waded into the surf, while Deliah had found a spot to sunbathe. Despite their causal aplomb, Cade knew the months of fruitless searching had taken a toll on them. Even as they enjoyed the beach, they emanated restless impatience in the Force, Deliah especially. Empathic, pleasure-seeking Zeltrons weren't known for their loyalty or patience, and the fact that she'd stuck with Cade as long as she had was flattering and humbling both. Still, she'd said more than once that she'd like to settle down eventually and enjoy some of the riches they'd heisted from Rav. Each time she got more insistent.

The two other former Force-users in their party had gone off into the jungle. While passing over the island they'd spotted not only the ruins of what looked like a large temple made from white stone, but also the remnants of a spacecraft nearly devoured by the forest. How long either had been here, they had no idea, but Jedi Master Lowbacca and former Imperial Knight Jao Assam had gone to find out.

Though they came from different schools, Lowbacca and Jao had bonded plenty over their lost Force-powers. More, they both had that certain selfness nobility about them that Cade found alternately cloying and useful. As time went on their desire to regain what they'd lost had grown only sharper, and they'd plunged eagerly into the jungle, barely remembering to ask Cade if he'd sensed dangers in the forest.

He'd told them no; whatever dark presence there was in the Force felt millennia distant. Lehon was harmless now. Harmless but creepy.

Cade hadn't gone into the jungle with them. Whatever they found here wouldn't help trace Khat Lah or recover the Force, but if Lowbacca and Jao wanted to kid themselves for a few hours he wasn't going to stop them. He wasn't in the mood to join Jariah and Deliah on the beach either; the Rakata's lingering miasma robbed the scene of its idyll.

Because he didn't feel fit for either crowd, Cade eventually returned to *Mynock*. He could hear the last members of the party in the main hold but had to circle

around the parked landspeeder to spot them. Kyra was sitting cross-legged behind the speeder with a hydrosponder in her hand and the engine panel and several components on the deck next to her. The lanky dark-haired girl looked up when Cade approached, but her companion didn't seem to notice, or stop talking.

"Slow down, Professor," Cade told the golden protocol droid. "What are you on about?"

C-3PO shifted to fix his twin photoreceptors on the new arrival. "Ah, Master Cade. I was just informing Mistress Kyra about the history of Lehon, also known as Rakata Prime, as recorded by Old Republic historian Balak-nor-man in the year—"

"Of course you were." Cade patted his metal shoulder and asked Kyra, "You ask for this lecture, or did he volunteer again?"

"I asked," the teenager smiled faintly and remained seated. Squatting on her other side, R2-D2 hummed confirmation.

"I didn't realize the landspeeder needed fixing," Cade said.

"Not *fixing*," Kyra said, "But Deliah suggested I clean out the power cells and grease up the fuel injectors. Just to keep it running in top shape."

"That's a good idea," Cade said. Since losing the Force, Kyra had been forced to relearn her natural aptitude for machines. Deliah had been doting on her a little, giving her lessons. *Mynock's* mechanic wasn't acting maternal exactly; it was more of a big-sister mode, which was a side of Deliah he hadn't seen before.

He hardly minded them spending time together; Kyra clearly needed to feel like she was pulling her weight on *Mynock*. Unlike Jao and Lowbacca, she'd barely been aware of her Force-powers before having them stolen away. After spending years in indebted service to Rav- which had left her with a red bloody bones tattoo on her right bicep as clear as the one on Cade's- she'd helped Ania Solo, Cade and the rest on their big heist of Rav's treasure. She had no living family, no place to go except join them in the long, futile-seeming search for Khat Lah.

"Any idea when Jao and Lowbacca will be back?" she asked. "They've been gone a couple hours."

“Who knows? They haven’t been eaten by jungle monsters, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“So you can feel them?”

“I’d know if they got hurt or killed,” he said.

Kyra nodded, but didn’t seem assured. “What do they expect to find out there?”

That set C-3PO off. “Well, as you know, Mistress Kyra, Lehon was the center of the Rakatan Infinite Empire for some ten thousand years. The ruins on this island seem to be the largest left on this planet, and though millennia have passed it’s possible they may yet find something useful among the rubble.”

“I know, Threepio,” Kyra said without a trace of annoyance. The protocol droid- broken and scrambled as he’d been- was her best friend during her years of indebted service in Rav’s junkyard. She had more patience for him than Cade ever would. “But there’s no sign Khat Lah’s been here, is there?”

When this long hunt had started they’d met with Nei Rin, the Yuuzhan Vong shaper who’d worked with Kol’s father on the ill-fated Ossus Project. She was still working to undo the Sith damage wrought on their bio-terraforming projects and even meeting with some success. Nei Rin had reported that Khat Lah had come to her four years earlier, piloting an Incom IC-2 scout ship, which Cade and company had scoured for at every planet they’d searched. Nei Rin also explained that Khat Lah had requested an ooglith masque and the bio-equipment needed to keep the living organism fresh. Nei Rin had provided one which would allow Khat Lah to disguise himself as human and pass through most worlds unnoticed. Nei Rin had also provided an image of what Khat Lah would look like in that disguise.

Most importantly, she’d explained that she’d sent Khat Lah to meet another Yuuzhan Vong. There weren’t many of them roaming away from their adopted homeworld Zonama Sekot, which was now quarantined and hidden in the Unknown Regions. Those that did had to travel in disguise, thanks to the century-old hatred their race aroused among the rest of the galaxy, and for their own safety these rogue Yuuzhan Vong tended to keep a loose communication network.

Nei Rin had send Khat Lah to a Yuuzhan Vong living incognito under the name Jazar Ordon. Cade and company had tracked Ordon with the help of *another* rogue Vong named Chonyo, who'd once crewed on Rav's *Crimson Axe* and imparted Jariah with a fondness for the aliens' living weapons. After some pressuring, Ordon had admitted that he'd provided Khat Lah with forged identity documents to match his masquered face, thus allowing him to pass through the whole of the civilized galaxy as a Corellian named Reikar Horn.

It had felt like a promising start. In the ensuing months they'd crossed the galaxy several times over, visiting planets K'Kruhk had suggested they search, looking for signs of Reikar Horn and his IC-2 scoutship. A few times they'd found cold leads and chased them anyway, but ended up with nothing to show. They were pretty sure Khat Lah had visited Obroa-Skai, Dathomir, Dantooine, and Taris, but they were far from reconstructing his journey and farther from finding where he was now.

Lehon, once Rakata Prime, had also been on K'Kruhk's list and a big pain to get to. If Khat Lah had stopped here, there was no sign of it, which meant they'd made a long trip for nothing yet again.

"Maybe Jao and Lowie will turn up something useful," Cade told Kyra, though he doubted it. "But I think it's safe to say Khat Lah's not here now." He looked toward the hold's open portal. "You get out and enjoy the beach?"

"A little," the girl said. "But I'd rather work on this. Keep busy."

"And get a history lesson."

She smiled faintly. "That too."

"Then I'll stop getting in your way." He patted C-3PO on the shoulder once more. "You can take it from here, professor. Just don't put her to sleep."

Feeling restless and still pressured by the dark miasma, Cade wandered back outside and made his way from *Mynock* to the white-sand beach. The afternoon sun was getting low and the sunlight tinted gold. One of Lehon's moons hung in the western sky, half-faded but huge, visibly pocked with ridges and craters.

Jariah and Deliah were both on dry land now, lounging in the low-backed chairs they'd taken off *Mynock* and set down in the sand. Jariah was shirtless and Deliah bared even more pink skin than usual. As he came up behind them Cade asked, "You all enjoying your sunny vacation?"

Deliah tilted reflective sunglasses down her face so she could look right at Cade. "The scenery's great but the service is lacking."

He reached out and clasped her right hand. "You want, I can go back to the galley and get some drinks."

"You got the ingredients for a Bidalian sunrise?"

"I think I can mix one up. What about you, Jariah? Want something nice to help watch the sun go down?"

"Give me a bottle of Johrian brandy and I'm set."

"I think we've got one of those too." Cade had made a point to stock their liquor reserves before setting out on this long, long mission.

"Then go get 'em," Jariah said. "Blue and me... We'll wait here a while."

"I thought you'd say that."

"Seriously, *meeshku*," Deliah squeezed his hand. "We can stay here just for a few days, right? Not often we get a chance to set down on a planet pretty as this."

It looked pretty, but it sure as hell didn't *feel* pretty. At least places like Korriban wore evil on their sleeve. Cade said, "We'll see what Jao and Lowie come back with. Kyra's getting a little edgy too."

"Then she should get out here and soak up some sun. Being cooped up inside *Mynock* too long's not good for anybody."

"You love *Mynock*."

"I do. But everybody needs a break now and then." She squeezed his hand. "We got any better place to be?"

Cade sighed. "There's some more planets we can check from K'Kruhk's list... I just wish we had stronger leads."

"We could always give up acting noble and settle down to enjoy the fruits of our criminal activity," Jariah said with a grin, but Cade knew he was serious.

"We will one day, I swear. We just... gotta take care of this first." For the sake of the Jedi, all deaf to the Force. For the

sake of his mother, who'd died trying to uncover Darth Maladi's secrets.

Cade let go of Deliah and made his way back to the ship. He arrived just as two figures emerged from the brush: one tall ginger-furred Wookiee and one dark-skinned man who normally looked crisp and clean like an Imperial recruitment poster, though right now his face was patched with sweat and dirt. Lowbacca was carrying a white-stone cylinder the size of an astromech over his shoulder with apparently little effort.

"What's with the rock?" Cade called as he joined them up the entry ramp into the hold. "Find any great and fancy secrets?"

Lowbacca roared response, and C-3PO shuffled out from behind the parked landspeeder, clearly eager to translate. "Master Lowbacca says that they have uncovered a piece of rubble among the ruined Rakata temple that appears to be covered with inscriptions. He suggests this may have been used for official pronouncements in public places, similar to the message pillars used on Bimmisaari or by the natives of Ashelon IV."

Kyra and R2-D2 came into view as well, though they kept their distance as Lowbacca placed the pillar on the middle of the deck. The Wookiee howled another question.

"Well, of course I can attempt to translate, Master Lowbacca. I am, after all, fluent in over six million forms of communication, including several ancient Rakatan dialects."

As C-3PO took in the ideographs carved into the pillar, Cade looked to Jao. "How you holding up? Get attacked by any savage jungle monsters?"

"Just a few flitgnats," the Imperial Knight said. Though he'd officially left that order and no longer had Force-powers besides, he kept in communication with the empress, feeding her updates on this mission the same way Lowbacca kept in touch with the Jedi Council. Not that either of them had much to report.

"Well, that sounds boring." Cade put hands on his hips. "What about that ship we saw when we passed over? You check out that thing?"

"There wasn't much to see. The entire hull is corroded. Plants have grown through most of the interior now but we

tried to take it apart for a better look. Based on the parts and materials, Lowbacca says it's been here for at least eight centuries."

The Wookiee, who'd been working spaceships since before Cade's great-grandparents were born, roared his affirmative.

"Hmmm... Yes, I see..." C-3PO said, as though to himself. The prissy droid could be disturbingly human sometimes.

"What is it, Threepio?" asked Cade.

"The inscription is chipped in many places, and the dialect is rather antique, but I believe I can read most of the inscription..."

Cade was about to ask what it said when the comlink in his pocket buzzed. That surprised him; he didn't think Jariah or Deliah had brought anything to the beach besides chairs and swimwear, and everyone else on his crew was right here. That had to mean *Mynock* was receiving an outside hail.

He checked the small readout on his comlink and recognized the caller's identification code. It was Chonyo, Jariah's old Vong pal. Cade flicked his comm on and said, "This is *Mynock*. Cade speaking."

A gruff, static-marred voice replied, "Skywalker? Where's my boy Jariah?"

"Lounging in the sun and waiting on a bottle of brandy. You want to speak with him?" Chonyo always wanted to talk to Jariah directly.

"Yeah, I've got something for you both."

"Great. Just hold on a second." Cade tapped his comlink, closed the line, and was about to call Jariah when he remembered the man was one the beach with nothing but his chair and swimsuit.

"Hey, Kyra," Cade called, "You wanna go down to the beach, haul Jariah back here? Tell him Chonyo's waiting."

"Sure." The girl set off, eager for something to do.

"And hey," Cade added, "Once you send him up here, stay down there and enjoy the scenery if you want."

"I'll think about it," Kyra said, and trotted down the landing ramp.

It would take a few minutes yet for Jariah to return, so Cade turned his attention back to the white-stone inscription and the protocol droid.

“Sorry for the interruption. So what’s this thing say?”

“Well, despite the damage to the pillar and antique dialect, I believe this reads as follows.” C-3PO’s voice deepened to sound authoritative. “All glory to over-Predor Nos’Lak, conquerer of Xo, Plooma, Kresseria, Voronia, Mekor, and Talazza, desecrator of Moldoris and ravager of Mek-pok-tem. All glory to he who delivered slaves to labor for the greater power of the Infinite Empire. Five hundred thousand humans, three hundred thousand Gree, one-point-seven million Kwa, eight hundred thousand Sharu...” C-3PO paused and pitched his voice to normal. “It goes on like this for a while, sir. Should I go on?”

“Propaganda,” Cade rolled his eyes. “Should’ve figured. Great find, guys.”

“This is all we could get,” Jao said tersely. “And we spent hours looking through that rubble.”

“No sign anybody else has been there recently?”

Lowbacca roared and shook his shaggy head, then added something else.

“He’s right,” said Jao, who’d gotten pretty good with Shyriiwook over the past year. “Even if Khat Lah *did* come here, he might not have left anything for us to find. Even if he did, I think that jungle would eat it up fast.”

“Figures,” Cade muttered. Another dead end, with almost two weeks of transit time getting here wasted. It was what he’d expected, but it still hurt.

Lowbacca roared a suggestion that they could try searching ruined sites at other islands.

“I guess it’s worth a shot,” Cade shrugged. “Deliah, she wants to lounge around here a little more. Can’t say I blame her, all the time spend cooped up on *Mynock*. Guess we could fly around to a few more islands. We can look at *stoopa* ruins and she can have her beaches”

Lowbacca roared, a little mournfully, that they might as well try.

“Are you okay with that?” Jao asked Cade, eyeing him carefully. “You said this place... has a unique feel.”

“Yeah, you could say that.” His voice came out brittle. “But I can deal with it. I’ve been in dens of the dark side a lot more lively than this place.”

Jaao nodded; so did Lowbacca. He could feel their pity that he alone had to shoulder the echoes of Lehon's dark past. He also felt their envy; they craved the feel the Force in any form, even grim echoes.

The mood was slightly alleviated by the sight of Jariah walked up the landing ramp, barefoot and shirtless. Cade was pleased to see that Kyra had stayed at the beach.

"What did Chonyo want?" he asked Cade.

The other man shrugged. "Since when did he ever tell me anything? You're his favorite *bukee*."

"Well, let's go find out."

Leaving the others in the hold, Cade and Jariah went up the stairs, down the hall and through the crew lounge, all the way to the cockpit and the main communication system. On the way Jariah plucked a thin shirt draped over the lounge sofa and was pulling it over his head as Cade dropped into the pilot's chair and re-established the connection with Chonyo.

Jariah sat in the co-pilot's seat, and when the holo-image popped up Cade was slightly surprised to be staring at the elaborate tattoos, sloped forehead, and flat nose of a Yuuzhan Vong. Chonyo must have been calling from somewhere private if he didn't have his masquer on.

Jariah seemed unphased. "How you doing, you old pirate?"

"I'm doing halfway decent," the Yuuzhan Vong smiled, baring sharp narrow teeth. "How's the search going?"

"It's going nowhere right now, unless you've got a hint."

"I do," Chonyo said. "I've also come into some merchandise I bet you'd be interested in."

"What kind?" asked Jariah.

"Your favorites. Three different variety of thud bugs, a few amphistaffs..."

Highly illegal Vong-formed living weapons, in other words. Chonyo had given Jariah training with those exotic weapons back on the *Axe*, and Cade's friend loved his lethal toys.

"I'm interested," Jariah said. "And we're still flush with cash. When and where can I see the merchandise?"

"Where are you now?"

Cade answered for him. "A long, long way from civilized space. Where are *you*?"

“Me? I’m wrapping up some business on Javin. I’ve got a client to meet on Bospin in two days.”

“Bospin?” Jariah frowned. “What’s there?”

“There’s still tibanna gas to mine. And the old Cloud City. It ain’t what it used to be, but there’s still business to be done. How far are you boys from Bospin?”

Cade thought a moment. “Let’s say, six days. Maybe seven.”

“I can be on Cloud City in six days. Or seven. Will *you* be there?”

“You’ve got out word,” Jariah nodded eagerly.

“Hold up,” Cade said. “You mentioned some intel we’d like. Can you give us anymore?”

“I’ve got verification of activities by one Reikar Horn from within the fast fifteen months.”

A lot could happen in fifteen months, a damn lot, but all the traces they’d found of Khat Lah had been even older than that. “We’re interested,” Cade said.

“I knew you would be. We’ll talk about it once we meet up on Bospin.”

“And after we pay you for the contraband?”

Chonyo gave a hissing laugh. “I know you *pateesas* are good for it, now that you’ve got all of poor Rav’s cash.”

Reminders that Rav was now, literally, poor made Cade feel warm inside. “Well, I can’t deny it. We’re gonna have to haul to get to Bospin in a week, but I think we can do it.”

“Good to know. See you soon, lads.”

“See you soon, *pateesa*,” Jariah agreed, and the holo switched off.

His friend had a big grin, like a kid promised candy, but Cade felt a little sour. “Wish he’d told us more about this big scoop of his.”

“He’ll tell us in person,” Jariah said without rising from his seat. Through *Mynock*’s viewport they saw mostly jungle green, now draped in long shadows as the sun set. Lehon’s huge moon hung in the sky dead ahead.

“Blue ain’t gonna like the runaround,” Cade said as he remembered her, still on the beach and waiting for her Bidalian sunrise.

“Then you’ll just have to cheer her up. I recommend starting with her drink.”

A cocktail as the sun went down didn’t replace a week on gorgeous beaches, but it was still pretty good. Cade pushed off from his chair and went back to the galley to make one. He hoped Deliah would savor the fleeting pleasures and not hold their fast exit against him.

Personally, he was glad to get off Lehon. Places like this made him envy the blind and deaf.

They’d chased their quarry a long way, from a trading port on Toprawa to a repair yard on Botajef, and finally to this space station orbiting Ciutric IV. Now the only thing that stood in their way was one sealed-tight metal door in the station’s habitat ring, which should have been nothing for two Sith.

Instead, Eli Horn and Darth Talon paused before pushing through. The station was in the middle of its night-cycle and no one had moved in the hall for over five minutes. In other times the Force would have given them warning if someone was approaching; instead all they could do was listen very carefully.

Eli picked up no sound except for the faint whine of the station’s air circulators. Darth Talon, wearing a hooded cloak that concealed the fierce red-and-black tattoos on her face, stepped carefully up to the door. Eli hung back, listening, looking down either end of the hall as Talon removed a tool from her cloak that would override the door’s safety lock.

With the Force they’d have been able to push the door aside, charge into the room, and seize Jazar Ordon in his bed. Bereft of their greatest tool, they had to fall back on mechanical tricks favored by vermin criminals galaxy-wide. It was a humiliation, but Eli had almost gotten used to those as they’d searched the galaxy for a trace of Khat Lah.

They’d had no success in that regard, but they’d at least uncovered a network of Yuuzhan Vong travelling incognito across the galaxy. Jazar Ordon, who’d they’d traced from Toprawa to this space station, was apparently one of the key information-dealers within that network. There was no guarantee he knew where Khat Lah was, but it was the best

lead they'd uncovered since starting this frustrating, fruitless quest.

Talon had pried away the door's access panel and was bent close over the wiring inside. Eli tensed; blood pounded in his ears as he reached into his cloak. He carried both a blaster and his lightsaber nowadays. During their many days spent travelling the stars he tried to practice with both equally, and he liked to think he could still wield his saber ably, even without the Force. For today, though, the blaster was more appropriate.

"It is ready," Talon said, so quietly Eli barely heard her over the throbbing on his pulse.

He stepped in right behind his master and pulled his blaster from his cloak. Talon reached inside the opened panel, touched two wires with her metal probe, and sparked the door to open.

Eli burst in first, pistol raised to fire. The room inside was mostly dark, but a porthole window let in reflected glow from Ciutric's moon. He saw a sofa, chairs, a living room table, then a second closed door. There was no lock to this one, and by the time Eli tapped it open, Talon was right behind him.

Another small window let faint light into the room beyond, marking a bed and a figure sprawled beneath the sheets. The two Sith lunged as one. The figure stirred, too late. Talon, as agile as ever, leaped onto the bed, straddled the man, and pinned him down. He tried to buck her off but failed, then raised his hands to strike. Talon grabbed his wrists firmly, holding them in place. Eli came around and tapped the tip of his blaster against the man's forehead, and finally he stopped struggling.

It was clear now this was not a man. Even in the low light Eli could mark his sloped forehead, thin lips, pointed teeth, and grey skin laced with tattoos.

"Who are you?" the Yuuzhan Vong hissed. "What do you want?"

"Information," said Eli.

"Information is my business. Show me your credits."

Ordon- or whatever his real name was- was brave. Eli gave him that. "We need you to tell us about Khat Lah."

"Never heard of him," Ordon said, after a too-long pause.

"He won't be using with that name," said Talon. "We know you specialize in procuring false identities for Yuuzhan Vong travelling the galaxy."

He didn't deny it. "Why are you after him?"

"That's no concern of yours."

"We don't mean to harm him," Eli said. It was true, but Talon gave him a disapproving look.

"I don't believe you," Ordon said.

"You have met Khat Lah. You provided him with false credentials," said Talon. "Is this correct?"

Ordon said nothing until her fists tightened, twisting his wrists painfully. The Yuuzhan Vong's face twisted but he kept from crying out. When Talon relaxed her grip he said, "I don't know where he is."

"When did you last hear from him?" asked Eli.

"Only once. When I gave him his false ID. That was four years ago. I have *nothing* for you, infidel."

"You're lying," Talon said, with shocking firmness.

Ordon stared. She tightened her grip on his wrists again. The Yuuzhan Vong grunted and said, "He has... friends... That's all I know."

"Meaning what?" frowned Eli.

"I heard he gathered more Yuuzhan Vong from Zonama Sekot. Maybe a year and a half ago."

That surprised Eli; best he knew the living world had retreated to hiding at the start of the Sith-Imperial War almost fifteen years ago, and not been heard from since. "How many Yuuzhan Vong?"

"A dozen. Two dozen. I don't know exactly. And I don't know why. I just *hear* things. It's my job."

Talon stared into his face, as though she could read his honesty in the Force. Finally she nodded and relaxed her grip without releasing his wrists. "What kind of ship was Khat Lah using when you saw him last?"

Ordon thought a moment. "An Incom IC-2 scout. But if he has a group of Yuuzhan Vong with him, they'll be using a bigger ship."

"Probably an organic ship from Sekot," Eli said. "Most of the Yuuzhan Vong on that world don't like using machines."

Ordon's eyes slid over to the human. "How do you know so much about us, infidel?"

It was a long story, and he wasn't going to tell it. "What name was Khat Lah using?"

"Reikar Horn."

Eli nearly dropped his blaster. In the years he'd known Khat Lah, watching with admiration and awe as the Yuuzhan Vong mastered Force talents that should have been impossible, he'd known that the warrior looked on his late father with a special reverence. At the start of the Sith-Imperial War, Reikar had sacrificed himself to an angry mob at Duro so Eli, Khat Lah, and a shipful of refugee could escape. Eli had been just five years old at the time; it was his worst and earliest memory. Khat Lah had taken it on himself to act as Eli's guardian for a time, though the demands of the war had drawn him away from the Jedi academy on Ossus.

And now Khat Lah had gone further, taking on his father's name. Eli didn't know if he should feel flattered or offended by the presumption.

As Eli recovered from his shock, Ordon told Talon, "That's all I know. I swear it."

"You're an information dealer. Is that really all you have?"

"Yes. Khat Lah... is secretive. He wouldn't tell me what he was doing, even when I asked. He wanted to be left alone."

Talon and Eli exchanged glances. The Twi'lek gave a small nod, showing she was satisfied.

"You've got what you want? Good," Ordon growled. "Now let's discuss payment."

"You're hardly in the position to negotiate." Talon squeezed his wrists harder.

The Yuuzhan Vong's face twisted in pain but he said, "I am an information dealer. I gave you information. You give me credits. The last ones paid and so can you."

"What last ones?" asked Eli.

"The last ones asking about Khat Lah."

"Describe them." Talon twisted his wrists.

Ordon's face twisted in pain again; instead of asking for money he said, "There were three. A big Wookiee and two humans. Males. One had dark skin, dreadlocks. The other one was blonde. This was... seven months ago, maybe."

Eli wasn't sure about the Wookiee, but it could have been the Jedi Master Lowbacca. The two humans sounded very much like Jariah Syn and Cade Skywalker. It was no surprise they'd be after Khat Lah, but now he and Talon knew for sure they weren't alone in the search. It could complicate matters greatly; for all they knew Skywalker had already found him.

"There, now I've told you everything," Ordon said. "Can I get my payment now?"

"Yes," Talon said. She released his wrists and, too fast for Ordon to react, drew a blaster from her cloak and put a single shot through the center of his chest.

Eli jerked back in shock. He looked to his master, who coolly put her gun away. "At least we have *something*," she said.

Eli looked back at Ordon's body. In the dim light he could just barely see his face, locked in an expression of surprise, both eyes staring up at the ceiling.

Once, when he'd been able to touch the Force, there had been a certain joy in killing. All too often Eli had been at the mercy of others' violence. He'd barely escaped from mob on Duro; much later, the people who were supposed to be sheltering him had turned him over to Darth Krayt's hunters for payment. The Sith had taught him that power came through strength, and strength came through violence, and when he'd enacted violence against others, he'd felt enriched by the power of the dark side.

Without the Force to surge triumph through his body, Eli just felt dirty and tired.

"I was expecting more," Talon said as she got off the bed.

"You heard what he said. Khat Lah was... secretive."

"I meant more of a struggle. They say Yuuzhan Vong are raised to endure pain, and that they prize loyalty to their race above all else." She straightened her robe and pulled the hood back over her head. "I suspect this one was... corrupted by too much time among vermin."

Eli wondered how much he and Talon had been corrupted without the Force. "Are we going to leave him here?"

"Yes. We'll be off the station before anyone finds his body."

“A dead Yuuzhan Vong is going to raise questions.”

“I have been covering our tracks the entire way, apprentice,” Talon said, brittle and defensive.

“All right.” Eli didn’t look away from the corpse. “Where do we go from here?”

“Perhaps,” she said, “We can look for a different sort of lead.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your research,” she said simply.

During their failed attempt to capture Darth Maladi, the only thing they’d salvaged from her laboratory were packets of datacards containing translations of ancient Gree archives. Reviewing them and trying to piece together their jumble of history and myth, all tens of thousands of years old, had given Eli something to do on their long journey if nothing else.

“What about my... research?”

“Perhaps it is time to look into it more deeply. You said Khat Lah was searching for the... source of the Force.”

“That’s how he put it,” Eli said, remembering a conversation he’d heard between Khat Lah and the Jedi Master K’Kruhk, one of the last times he’d seen either of them.

“Then perhaps your research chases the same things as Khat Lah,” Talon said. “You’ll have to explain to me what you’ve found. Once we’re away from here.”

Talon moved for the door. Eli took one last, hard look at the dead body they’d leave behind. It was hardly their first, but the way reflected starlight glared in Ordon’s wide-open eyes unsettled him.

His master seemed to have no such compunctions; that or she was better at hiding them. Talon was already out of the bedroom, on her way out of the apartment. Eli tucked his blaster in his robe, pulled his hood up to shield his face, and joined her.

Chapter Four

Lately Ania Solo had been doing a lot of things she'd have never imagined doing previously, and frankly, all of them still felt weird. Compared to some other things, walking into the lobby of an interstellar business conglomerate's headquarters and presenting herself to the front desk wasn't that strange.

The attendant was a young man about her age. One thing she'd learned was that big businesses never skimped on service and used droids. When she gave her name his eyes widened just a little in recognition; even after all that had happened since, some people still remembered her brief bout of public history-making two years ago. After widening they narrowed, discerning, like he was wondering if she was really the scruffy scrapper woman who'd landed on the news-nets after beating Darth Wredd.

She understood his confusion. Her normally-loose ponytail had been balled into a tight bun and her bangs pulled off her forehead. Her black trousers and white jacket had been exchanged for a trim business suit and a few pieces of authentic jewelry jangled around her wrists. Ania didn't look like her normal self and didn't feel like it either, but when you came in to meet an interstellar conglomerate's super-rich CEO, you had to look like you belonged.

After his initial response, the attendant checked his computer and confirmed, "Your appointment is scheduled and the chief is waiting for you. Please take lift number three to the highest level."

"Thank you," Ania said with her best polite smile.

The lift was a transparisteel capsule that lifted her up a tall glassy shaft so fast it gave her vertigo. By *top level* he'd really meant the top, and she took a second to gather herself when the lift finally stopped. Denon's ecumenopolis wasn't quite as impressive as Coruscant's, but it was still a hell of a sight seen from peak of one of its biggest skyscrapers.

She walked out of the capsule and smoothly as she could and into a conference room walled on all sides by curving transparisteel. The sole occupant seemed to take up half the space.

"Welcome," said the Hutt lounging on his repulsorsled. "I trust you had no problems getting here?"

He spoke Basic, deep and slurred but still clear. Hutts usually refused to speak anything but their own tongue, but as she'd been informed already, Volgma was not the usual Hutt.

"No problems at all." Ania did the polite smile again. "Thanks for being ready to see me."

"It is no problem. I say, it is an honor to meet Ania Solo, slayer of Darth Wredd."

"I didn't really *slay* him," she said. It had been more of a cheap shot.

"Nonetheless, you rid the galaxy of a Sith, and that is always commendable." Volgma's tail wriggled. "But I understand you're here today on your mother's business."

"She said you two have a history."

"Oh, yes. Your mother, your grandfather... An illustrious family."

"She said that back when the Jedi were falling to the Empire, you helped hide their financial assets. That you helped expand them with some... wise investments."

"Wise and *legal*," Volgma stressed. Ania's mother had warned her that this Hutt rankled at suggestion of impropriety. "When Krayt came to power, they arrested many business leaders suspected of Alliance sympathies. My poor colleagues the Calrissians were among them. The Sith believed I'd be amenable and let me keep my assets. I used that cover to help the Jedi for many years."

He seemed insistent on that point. "She also said you've helped manage *her* money for the past decade."

“Indeed.” Volgma’s fat tongue lolled out the side of his mouth. “And now you are working with her on her endeavor, yes?”

Ania nodded, but she didn’t feel she was working *with* her mother as much as *for* her. She’d spent over a decade thinking her mother had died in the last days of the Sith-Imperial War. Then, while the rest of the galaxy was staggered by Darth Maladi’s virus, she’d discovered that Marin was not only alive but leading a group of rogue Mandalorians intent on overthrowing the mercenary clans’ leader, Yaga Auchs. The discovery had shocked her and her first instinct had been to run, but eventually Ania had returned to see what part she could play in her mother’s life.

It was less than she’d expected. She’d spent more time these past months apart from her mother than with her, crossing the galaxy on various errands on Marin’s behalf. It felt like busy work, this trip included; Ania thought they could just have easily held this talk via secure comm line, but Marin had insisted she visit Volgma’s headquarters in person.

“Does your mother need to redistribute her assets?” Volgma asked. “Withdraw from investment funds?”

“Nothing like that. She’s very pleased with how you’ve been managing her money.” As he’d done with the Jedi’s hidden assets, Volgma had used some skillful insider trading to more than double Marin’s wealth. That was good; revolutions never came cheap.

“Then what other service can I provide?”

“It’s kind of complicated.” Ania reached into her breast pocket and drew a datacard. “This contains a list of date-ranges going back thirteen years. Those are the approximate times we know for certain that Yaga Auchs performed services for the Sith. My mom came into a bit of information recently that said Auchs keeps his secret, personal, private credit account with the First Demilla Bank on Raltiiir.”

“An interesting bit of information. I’m curious as to how she came to it.”

“She didn’t tell me,” Ania admitted. Her mother didn’t tell her a lot of things. “The point is, if we can look into accounts registered at First Demilla, we can probably pinpoint Auchs by matching deposits with the dates on this datacard. If we

pinpoint the account, we can maybe even trace where and who the deposits came from.”

Volgma’s voice deepened. “My dear, you know that information is classified. First Demilla prides itself on confidentiality for its clients. I don’t believe they even require clients’ names to register.”

“Which makes it popular for people who don’t want their finances snooped into. I understand that.” She took a breath. He was the tricky part. “We were wondering if you might have connections inside First Demilla you can point us to. More specifically, your uncle.”

Volgma’s wide mouth closed tight. From what Ania understood, this Hutt had been on the straight-and-narrow for two centuries. His uncle Vedo, however, was kajidic of the Anjiliac, one of the biggest criminal clans in Hutt space.

She also knew that Vedo had no love for the Sith after they’d bombed one of his moons and killed one of his other nephews. They said he’d helped the fight against Krayt in some way. She hoped he was still up for a little retribution.

“This is about exposing connections between the Mandalorians and the Sith,” Ania said. “For all we know, they may still be connected. Even without the Force the Sith are still a threat. If we can prove the links between them, we can get back at them both.”

“You presume many things,” Volgma rumbled. “You presume I can simply *ask* Vedo for this. You presume he has the capacity to deliver.”

“I’m not assuming anything. That’s why I came here to make this request in person and talk it over.”

“My uncle and I have kept our businesses separate. I have nothing to do with the Anjiliac’s operations.”

“But you’re family,” Ania said gravely. “Doesn’t that mean he has some obligation?”

The Hutt made a deep growling sound. “What do you know of the bonds of kajidic?”

“Not much,” she admitted, “If I didn’t think family was important, I wouldn’t be doing this for my mother right now.”

“Indeed,” Volgma huffed. His breath was hot and foul. “I have no idea if Vedo has connections inside First Demilla.

He may have the capacity to gain them. He may request remuneration.”

“You have access to our accounts. You can give him whatever he wants.”

“I have your mother’s permission?”

“You do. This is important to her. If we can follow the money and expose what Auchs has done, well, my mom can finally get what she’d after.”

Volgma’s tail-end twitched. “And what are *you* after, Ania Solo?”

She’d been asking herself that a lot lately. “I’m just trying to help her any way I can.”

“Very well.” He smacked his tail against the repulsor-bed. “I will speak with Vedo Anjiliac on your behalf. I promise nothing.”

“We understand. Thank you, Volgma. My mother knew she could count on you.”

The Hutt made another huffing noise. She guessed that meant he was satisfied.”

Ania didn’t stay much longer. She was glad to get out of the sleek glassy skyscraper and hurried back to the spaceport where her ship was docked. *Free Agent* hardly looked like a ship for the moneyed class, which was just the way she preferred. When she climbed up the landing ramp and into its narrow, utilitarian corridors it felt like a reprieve.

“You guys ready to get off this rock?” she called, “Cause I sure am.”

“*Free Agent* is ready to launch at any time,” replied a mechanical voice from the aft end of the ship. “However, it would be best to wait until we are fully manned.”

Ania followed it back to the main hold in the rear of the ship. She found a tall, thin assassin droid standing before one of the ship’s computer access terminals a jack extended from his arm. Instead of turning to face Ania, AG-37 rotated the upper half of his conical head to fix a single red photo-receptor on her.

“Sure there’s nothing wrong with the ship?” she asked.

“Quite sure. I was merely running routine diagnostics.” AG-37 withdrew from the computer. “However, as I implied, we are still missing a crew member.”

“Sauk’s not back yet?”

“Not yet. He said there is a Mon Calamari refugee cluster on Denon that he wanted to contact, and ideally donate some funds.”

“Never imagined they’d settle here,” muttered Ania. City planets like Denon always made her feel edgy and claustrophobic. Still, she didn’t hold Sauk’s efforts against him. He was making better use of his share of Rav’s stolen treasure than she was.

“In their situation, I can’t imagine the refugees are too particular,” AG-37 said dryly. “Was your visit to Volgma Industrial Limited a success?”

“As much as it could be.” Ania peeled off the suit jacket, tossed it over the nearest bench, and flexed her shoulders. “He’ll look into it. Final results pending. If Vedo can help us it’ll be a little while before we find out.”

“Then our business on Denon is concluded?”

“Mine is. Hopefully Sauk’ll be back soon and we can get going.”

“And we’re returning to Concord Dawn?”

“Yeah. I think we should.”

Most likely her mother would send her away on some other ancillary mission. Ania had told AG-37 and Sauk repeatedly that if they wanted to strike out on their own they were welcome to; she wouldn’t even hold it against them taking *Free Agent*. For better or worse, she’d committed herself to not running away from her mother, even if Marin seemed intent on keeping her at arm’s length. The fact that most of Ania’s instincts compelled her to run made it all the more important to stay.

But, unsurprisingly, her friends were staying with her. She’d known and trusted Sauk for a long time, and AG-37 longer. He had bound himself to Ania for reasons she still didn’t entirely grasp, and probably never could; the droid’s connection with the Solo family went back farther than any human lifespan, and because of it he’d vowed to protect her.

She didn’t much need protection at this point. Her mother was playing a dangerous game going after Auchs but as yet that danger hadn’t reached their hiding place at Concord Dawn, and it had been an impressively long time since

anybody had fired a blaster at Ania in anger. Sauk had suggested her mother kept sending her offworld to keep her safe; that might have been part of it, but Ania knew when she was being shoved aside.

Stepped away from the computer console, AG-37 said, "I will go to the cockpit and begin running pre-flight checks. Sauk estimated they he would get back to the ship the same time as you, and he is generally punctual."

Ania hadn't dawdled any at Volgma's place either. "Thanks, A-gee," she called to his metal back as he clanked out of the hold and down the hallway.

Ania sighed and picked up the fancy suit jacket with two fingers pinched at the collar. Sauk was spending his share of their bounty on noble causes; she was using scraps to buy uncomfortable clothes while the rest got inflated by some Hutt's barely-legal investment game. She didn't know what she'd been expecting when she'd gone back to her mother; after ten years apart she'd barely remembered the woman at all. She'd been hoping for something more than this.

Ania was eager to get out of the rest of that suit, and by the time she'd changed into her usual black trousers and white jacket Sauk had returned. The Mon Cal mechanic insisted on doing his own set of preflight checks, which didn't take long, and soon *Free Agent* was pushing into the sky, leaving Denon's sprawling cityscape behind. When it shrunk beneath them and disappeared beneath a veil of silver clouds, Ania released a satisfied sigh.

As they pointed their nose toward starlight she asked Sauk, "How did it go with the refugees?"

"They were grateful for the contribution," he said. "I wish I could have given more, but there's a lot of groups out there who still need help."

"Well, even our money's not unlimited. And you can't just put a price sticker on what they've lost."

"No." Sauk blinked large eyes. "Coruscant's promised to select a world for refugees to use permanently. They say they'll start moving settlers by the end of the year."

He didn't sound overjoyed. "That's good, isn't it?"

"We've gotten big promises before. They don't always pan out."

As he patched in their first hyperspace jump, AG-37 said, "It's my understanding that the guarantee was made by Marasiah Fel herself."

"That sounds like a good sign," Ania said.

Her dealings with the empress- also her distant cousin- hadn't always been ideal, but fundamentally she seemed like an honorable woman. And if anyone could force a home for the refugees through, it would be the empress of the known galaxy.

"I think it is," Sauk nodded, "But she has a lot on her hands now. The new senate, obviously, and the stuff going on in the Outer Rim--"

"What stuff?" Ania asked.

"The Nagai have launched several attacks in the Saijo and Seia sectors," AG-37 supplied. "They seem to be retracing their conquests from before the Sith-Imperial War."

Ania shrugged. "I was, what, eight years old then? I didn't really follow the news."

She didn't follow it much now, either. Her concerns had always been on things closer to home.

As the ship shuddered and *Free Agent* jumped into hyperspace she asked, "Anything new from Jao and Kyra?"

Sauk shook his head. "The last message we got from them said they were going into the Unknown Regions. That was a few weeks ago."

Ania hadn't expected much, but she was still disappointed. Now and then, but never as often as she liked, they got a hail from Cade Skywalker's *Mynock* and an update on the long-shot search for Khat Lah, Yuuzhan Vong Jedi. She enjoyed seeing her friends when she could, but there was always an underlying awkwardness on those calls. She could only discuss what they'd been doing for Marin in the vaguest terms, and when Jao and Kyra asked about how she was getting on with her mother, she always changed the subject.

"Maybe we'll get something before we reach Concord Dawn," Sauk added. "It's a few days' trip."

A few days there, a few days at the encampment Marin and her Mando comrades had set up, then probably they'd be sent somewhere else. Ania had long gotten tired of it but she'd repeat the pattern as long as she had to. She wasn't

ready to run from her mother's legacy; not yet, anyway. So she'd trudge on with it, for now.

Planets within Mandalorian space were rarely glamorous, and Concord Dawn was no exception. It was mostly agricultural and dotted by settlements where no building rose higher than a hundred meters. There was little government to speak of and nothing to attract visitors and investors from outside the sector. Most outbound ships carried foodstuffs to nearby worlds. Some claimed it was where Mandos went to retire.

Importantly, it was a planet without any orbital flight control satellites to monitoring incoming and outgoing craft. Therefore, a ship could kick off from one side of the planet, peak in lower orbit, then dive down to the opposite hemisphere and credibly claim to have arrived from another planet entirely. That was an especially useful trick, one Marin had just used on Parc Bralor. His clan had a generally good history with hers, and she knew the man had a list of grievances against Yaga Auchs, but she couldn't afford to trust him, and therefore used a little subterfuge to hide her base of operations.

Marin had brought two compatriots with her, Hondo Karr and his wife Tes Vevec. To underscore the informal nature of the talks, neither they nor Bralor wore any *beskar*. It was just drab brown tunics when they sat down in the kitchen of Bralor's farmhouse to parley over mugs of heated ale.

As he sipped from his drink, Bralor eyed Hondo. "It's brave of you showing up here, Karr. For years now, Auchs has been putting it out there that you were the one who killed Ordo and set your *vode* up to die at Botajef."

"That was a lie," Tes said sternly. The auburn-haired woman had spent the better part of a decade hunting down her husband for his supposed treason, but now that they'd reunited her faith seemed unassailable.

"Maybe so." Bralor shrugged. "You didn't do yourself any favors running. I heard you joined the Imps, then the Alliance. You get around, son."

"And what was I supposed to do?" Hondo raised a blond brow.

“Why, strut into the center of Keldabe and challenge Auchs to honorable combat,” Bralor said seriously, then snorted. “Everyone knows you had your back to the wall. But the way you’ve been skulking all this time doesn’t look too good. Auchs still had some bounties out on you.” His dark eyes shifted to Tes. “And you, since you joined him.”

“Notice how all those bounties are for ‘dead’ only,” said Tes. “It’s almost like Auchs doesn’t want us talking.”

Bralor took another sip, then put down his mug. “Believe it or not, your fellow *Mando’ade* aren’t stupid. A lot of people thought what happened at Botajef didn’t smell right. If you’d tried and done something right after he took over you might have gotten support, Karr, but the fact is, people have gotten used to Auchs in charge. *Shab*, I hate to say it, but he’s done a halfway decent job as *Mand’alor*. He hasn’t gotten our *gett’s*e in a grinder by meddling in the last war. We’re not pulling in contracts like we used to, but life is still comfortable in the Mandalorian sector. So even if your unsubstantiated claim about Auchs being a murderous treasonous *chakaar* was true... What then?”

As he talked he let his gaze drift over to Marin. She said, “He killed Chernan Ordo. He’s a traitor, *dar’manda*, and we’re going to prove that.”

Truthfully, she still didn’t know how she could do that. She didn’t even know whether proof of Auchs’ initial deal with Darth Maladi existed anymore. The errand she’d sent Ania on was a long shot, but it was still the best they had.

Bralor shook his head. “Listen, Skirata, everyone knows your clan’s got bad blood with the Auchs. That won’t do your cause favor either. If the day comes when you try to claim the Mythosaur crown—”

“I won’t,” Marin said firmly. “I have no intention or desire to become *Mand’alor*.”

Bralor stared at her. He took a big drink, stared some more, and finally asked, “What’s your endgame, then?”

“We remove Auchs,” she said, “But only once we’ve ensured a successful transition of power.”

“I’m no *aruetti* politician. Speak plain.” His eyes darted to Hondo. “You want the crown, Karr?”

“I want justice.”

“Justice? Only time I trust ‘justice’ is when I’ve got a knife at the throat of the judge.” Bralor snorted; then his eyes widened in realization. “Is that what you’re here for? You canvassing on who should be the next *Mand’alor*?”

“Are you interested?” asked Tes.

He shook his head. “I like farming just fine.”

He meant it; Marin could feel that when she reached out with the Force. For a long part of her life she’d purposely denied its power. Now, apparently, she was one of only a handful of beings left in the whole galaxy who could use it. Given what she was doing here, she could hardly afford to turn down that kind of tool.

“We just want your opinion,” Marin told him. “Start with the people close to Auchs already.”

He frowned. “You want Auchs replaced by one of his lieutenants?”

“If you think this is a revolution we’re aiming for, you’re wrong. This is personal.”

Hondo added, “You say most Mandos are happy laying low and staying out of the galaxy’s *osik*. That’s fine. Who do you think would keep that going?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe Vaun Zerimar.”

Unlike most of Auchs’ lieutenants, Marin had met the woman briefly. Zerimar was one of the ones who’d attached themselves to the man after he’d claimed the *Mand’alor* title. She’d struck Marin as overly ambitious but still pragmatic.

“What about Thorum Rhal?” she asked. She knew for a fact that Rhal had worked with Darth Maladi to distribute the Force-killing virus. Tes’ brother had nearly captured the man at Ord Mantell.

“Rhal’s been laying low since his run-in with the authorities.”

“We’ve heard that.” Marin leaned forward. “We’ve also heard he’s the one closest to Auchs.”

“Doesn’t mean he’d continue his policies. Auchs was close to Ordo and you say he stuck a knife in his back.”

“So Rhal’s more interventionist,” said Tes.

“Maybe. It’s all hard to say.” He looked at them with skepticism. “None of you barves want to run the show? Really?”

"I already said we're not revolutionaries," Marin said.

"Right. You say this is personal. Fine. You know Yaga Auchs has a daughter, right?"

Marin nodded, chest tight. Of course she knew. The woman was only a little younger than Ania. Older, too, than Yaga Auchs had been when Marin had killed *his* father Kaynar. Bralor knew some of the bad history between the Auchs and Skirata clans, but not all. Neither did Hondo or Tes.

Only a handful of people knew that Marin, at just fourteen years old, half killed *Mand'alor* Gevern Auchs while defending her mother. Years later his brother Kaynar and nephew Yaga had killed two of Marin's cousins in retribution, erroneously thinking them responsible. And then Marin Fel- Jedi ranger, part-time Mando- had gotten retribution of her own. With black rage in her heart and Force-lighting in her hand she'd killed Kaynar in front of his son. She still remembered the teenage boy's terrified face and the sickened self-loathing that came with it.

She'd left behind the Jedi, the Force, and the Mandos soon after, and for a while became Marin Solo.

Marin had made Yaga Auchs, which meant she was responsible for all he'd done since, including helping the Sith at the critical point in a war that had claimed her own family. Her act of mercy had done immeasurable harm to the galaxy and her own family. She wouldn't make that mistake again, and she wouldn't leave any loose ends that would one day come around to strangle her.

This time she would end the long bloody feud between Auchs and Skirata. This time she'd do it right.

"The Auchs have to be removed," she said. "Both of them."

Her cold words and hard stare left no doubt how far she was ready to go. Bralor simply nodded; he was Mandalorian to the bone and unmoved by the implication of brutality.

She should have been. As the Jedi Marin Fel she had been. So had Marin Solo, civilian freighter captain, wife and mother. Losing her family had turned her into Marin Skirata and burned away her qualms. Ania's return hadn't changed that.

Bralor lifted his mug of ale and took a gulp. "So. You want a replacement for Auchs. Maybe someone you can go to once you get absolute proof he killed Ordo."

"That's right," she said.

"Well, honestly, you could take it to karking any of 'em, take your pick. No need to ask me on it."

"Even Rhal?" asked Tes.

"If that's your poison."

Hondo said, "We were wondering if Rhal- or any of the others- might already know."

Bralor's face screwed in surprise, then went thoughtful. "Rhal was close to Auchs before he became *Mand'ador*. So was Joroc Karg. Neither of them were at Botajef, though."

"So none of them know Auchs murdered his *Mand'ador*?"

"Can't say a damn thing for sure, but I doubt it."

Tes looked relieved, Hondo thoughtful. That was information to remember, but they'd come here for something more.

"Another question," Marin said. "When Botajaef went down, you were based in Keldabe."

"I wasn't involved in politics."

"No, but you were around, and you must have heard about how Auchs' potential enemies were disappeared. Sometimes they'd come back all amenable to their new boss. Other times they'd stay disappeared."

Bralor stiffed. "I heard rumors."

"They were more than rumors," Marin said.

Back then her cousin Roan Fel had strong-armed her into helping investigate Auchs. They'd set up a man named Govum Haugh and one of Fel's Imperial Knights had tracked the poor barve after Auchs' thugs kidnapped him. The Imperial Knight- an Iktotchi named Eshkar Niin- claimed some Falleen had used their pheromones to work Haugh over. At the time Marin had just been relieved to go back to her family. Looking back she wondered if Niin had been fooled, or if he'd been telling the truth at all.

Leaning close to Bralor she said, "I know some of the ones who got reeducated. Govum Haugh. Bovar Shal. Vosh Woxu. They were all pretty big clan-leaders at the time, so it's no wonder Auchs wanted them loyal. I've been looking into them and it turns out Haugh died in a shuttle crash five years

ago. About a year after that, Shal got gunned down over a bounty nobody'd heard of. I think Woxu might still be alive."

She could feel his reluctance, his suspicion. "What's your point?"

"I did a little peeking into the financial records of this farm," she said. "Seems you did some commerce with Woxu just last year. Bought some binary grain harvesters off him for cheap."

"I'm really interested where you got that scrap of info."

It was the same place she'd gotten the fact that Yaga Auchs had a secret credit account with Raltir's most private bank. It had taken her years to relearn her old Force skills, but she'd gotten pretty good at prying information out of reluctant minds.

"What happened to Vosh Woxu?" she asked. "All I want is to talk to him."

Bralor shifted uncomfortably. "Woxu's still around. He left Mandalore about five years back, settled on a place at Breshig. Tried farming. Didn't really take, but I think he's still there. He's just trying to live a quiet life. That's all."

Maybe that was why he hadn't met sudden ends like Haugh and Shal. "I'm not going to mess up his quiet life. I just want to talk to him." As she said it, she gave Bralor a nudge with the Force. He was hardly weak-minded, and she'd never coerce him to do something alien to his character, but she could feel him teetering on the edge, deciding whether he wanted to alienate her over a man who wasn't even his friend.

Her nudge was all it took. "I can give you the info. I'll call ahead, tell him you're coming."

"No need." Marin smiled. "We'll introduce ourselves."

Bralor grunted, downed the last of his ale, and got up. A minute later he came back to the kitchen with a piece of flimsy containing written surface coordinates for Breshig, plus his home calling code as an alpha-numeric strain.

"Thank you," Marin said as she took the paper. "We won't forget this."

"Well, when you set up whatever new Mandalore you're aiming for, remember I just want to be left alone."

“Don’t worry,” Marin said, “That’s what we want too.”

Bralor looked incredulous, but it was true. Maybe not for Hondo and Tes, who wanted blood for blood, but Marin had firmly meant it.

She wanted to end the long and ugly history between Skiratas and Auchs. And this time, there’d be no loose ends.

Chapter Five

They said Mandalore was a planet that never changed much, supposedly because the locals were uninterested in anything besides killing and carousing. The first part seemed accurate enough to Darth Havok. After setting his shuttle down on the outskirts of the capital Keldabe he walked through its streets to the place where he was set to meet Yaga Auchs, and it seemed as though nothing had changed in the thirteen years since he'd last been here. The town, walled and perched on a hillside overlooking a river valley, was a jumble of low buildings and winding streets barely big enough to fit a landspeeder through. The population was dominated by Mandalorians in armor and faceless T-visor helmets, but there were enough unmasked visitors that Havok didn't feel totally exposed.

Everything looked the same as thirteen years ago, including Havok's face. The process of removing his tattoos had been excruciating, and for fear of looking weak he'd not asked for medication to dull the pain. Even now, after almost a week in transit, his skin sometimes broke out in itches and he wasn't used to the face he saw in mirrors. Removed of its golden iris and scarlet-and-black lines, it looked ordinary and tired and old. Not the face of a Sith it all.

He was far more than Eshkar Niin, even without the Force. He'd told himself that adamantly on the way here, and now that he'd finally arrived it was a relief to get to work. Before landing he'd broadcast a signal over a secure priority channel, one the Sith had used to communicate directly with Auchs in

the past. The conversation that followed had been short and brusque, and Auchs had given him instructions on where they would meet.

Havok didn't expect an easy conversation, and he didn't expect Auchs to be subservient. After Darth Maladi had bought the Mandalore's allegiance at Botajef, the Sith had helped him secure his grip over the rest of the warrior clans. After that they'd mostly left him to rule his little kingdom, contacting him rarely to use his mercenaries for minor missions. Their alliance had been of convenience only.

More importantly, everyone knew the Force had gone silent. The Mandalorians had flinched before the Sith's deadly mystique, but the days of grudging respect were gone, and it was good Havok had the blackmail card to play.

He followed Auchs' instructions and wandered into the downslope industrial part of the city. Its bulky, plain warehouses overflowed the crumbling walls and stood in contrast to the traditional architecture of the old city. Havok had been to this drab district before. As Eshkar Niin, he'd tracked Auchs' agents to a secret hideout in one of these warehouses and uncovered his Sith allies. It was here that his life had tipped toward Darth Havok, and he wondered if this choice wasn't a deliberate show by Auchs. That was unlikely; he'd never spoken with Auchs face-to-face and he doubted the Mandalore knew his story. Still, it disquieted him. Too much of his past was coming back.

When he reached the warehouse Auchs had designated, Havok tapped the entrance panel to the door and heard a buzzer muffled by layered metal. He waited, looking up and down the empty street. Just as he was getting impatient the door slid open, and he found himself looking at a figure in full *beskar'gam*, dark violet plates streaked with black.

From the frame and armor color, he guessed this wasn't Yaga Auchs, and got confirmation when a female voice sounded through the helmet speakers.

"Get inside," the woman said gruffly. She had a blaster hefted and resting on one shoulder-plate.

"I'm here to speak to the Mandalore," Havok said. "Is he here?"

"He's here. Now get inside."

Havok stepped through the door. The woman followed and closed it. With blaster still drawn but not aimed, she escorted him down a hall, past the office attached to the warehouse, and into the large central storage chamber. It was just like the place where Nihl and Vorkan had captured him all those years ago, maybe even the same building.

In the center of that plain empty space was a Mandalorian in full armor, green and brown. Havok recognized this one as Yaga Auchs.

"That's enough, *Sor'ika*," the man said. "Leave us alone."

The woman walked silently back into the office, closing the door and sealing them here. Havok didn't step closer to the Mandalorian. "You *are* Yaga Auchs, aren't you?" he asked. "I came all this way so we could speak freely. Face to face."

"You Sith," he said. "Always thinking you call the shots."

Havok didn't deign to retort. The Mandalorian reached up and wrenched the helmet from his head. The face beneath was that of a human in his middling years, strong and square-jawed, scalp shaved down to a retreating gray stubble. It was indeed Yaga Auchs.

"Satisfied?" Auchs asked as he tucked the helmet underarm. His free hand dangled near a holstered blaster.

"I am. My name is Darth Havok." The Iktotchi folded his hands in front of him. "Given the circumstances, I expected you to be more polite. Or at least apologetic."

"Maladi hired my people to kidnap Jedi and Imperial Knights. We had no idea what she was using their bodies for."

"And when she had you deliver two live captives back to the Jedi?"

"We did what she paid us to do. We had no idea what kind of disease she was sticking them with."

"And if you had known?"

"We didn't. That's all that matters."

"I hope that's the case." Havok began walking a slow circle around Auchs. It was an old technique to rattle someone. He'd be forced to either constantly pivot to watch the other man or stay firmly in one place and leave his back exposed. "Mandalorian antipathy to Force-users is well

known. With us temporarily disabled, it leaves an opening where your kind can become more assertive.”

Auchs elected to keep both feet planted. As Havok passed his flank he said, “We don’t have the numbers or the resources to go crusading again. We’re mercenaries. We fight then we’re paid to fight and the rest of the time we keep our noses out of galactic affairs. Sticking them where they’re not wanted only gets us trouble.”

He knew Auchs was speaking from personal wisdom. Helping the Sith stage a false-flag attack on the Chiss had gotten his uncle killed.

“You’ve inserted yourselves into galactic affairs whether you wanted to or not,” Havok reminded. “You’re lucky Coruscant hasn’t come down hard on your people for the help you gave Maladi. I heard a stormtrooper company almost captured one of your lieutenants at Ord Mantell. Thorum Rhal, wasn’t it?”

Auchs wasn’t intimidated by his show of intel. “Rhal escaped. And like you said, Coruscant hasn’t bothered us since. Maladi’s dead and they’ve got their own messes to sort out.”

Havok circled back around to face him. “You’re lucky. Coruscant is forgiving. The Sith are not.”

“What kind of Sith are you if you don’t have the Force?”

It was the central question for all of them now. Havok hid doubt behind a wicked smile. “We are still Sith, and we’re making our presence known.”

“Manpha?”

“Manpha is just the first step.” He began another circle around Auchs. “We’re going to need help with our war effort.”

“I told you, we’re not meddling in the big stuff anymore.”

“You’re mercenaries and you fight when you’re paid to fight. Don’t you?”

“We choose what fights we take up.”

“Then you’ll choose to take up this one. Not just because you’ll be paid a respectable sum for it, because you do not want to make an enemy of the Sith.”

As Havok walked behind him Auchs asked, “We’re not enemies yet?”

"The Sith and the Auchs are historic allies. It would be in all our interests if it stayed that way, especially yours."

As he came around on Auchs' other side, Havok removed a small holo-projector from his tunic pocket. He held the disc up and tapped its side, causing it to play. Two shrunken blue figures faced each other across lightyears, both recorded for posterity. One was Yaga Auchs, the other Darth Maladi.

"It's done," the decade-younger Auchs said. "We've withdrawn from Botajef. I left a few companies behind as rear guard, but the Imperials will be all over them."

"What about Chernan Ordo?" Maladi asked.

Havok came in front of Auchs and lifted the holo close so he could watch his own image say, "The Mandalore is dead."

"Are you sure?"

"I killed him myself."

"And no one knows?"

"Nobody left alive."

"Excellent. The Sith won't forget this."

"You'd better not. I'll need help consolidating my authority. You made a promise--"

"The Sith keep their promises," said Maladi. "Don't worry. Go back to Mandalore. Gather as many allies as you can. My agents will be in touch shortly to deal with the ones who don't welcome you as their new leader."

Havok tapped the projector off and slid it back into his pocket. Auchs' face was pinched to a scowl.

"I'm sure there are plenty who'd be interested in that conversation," Havok said casually. "We both know your reign as Mandalore couldn't survive a revelation like that. So let's be straightforward. You will lend your mercenaries to our campaign in the Outer Rim. I will put you in contact with Lord Nihl, and you will obey his orders to the letter. You will naturally be paid for your services. If you renege on that arrangement in any way, you'll no longer be Mandalore. Likely, you'll no longer be alive. Do you understand?"

Auchs glared murder at him. Havok was acutely aware of the danger; without the Force as his aid, this man could certainly kill him. Auchs was a violent and angry man but he'd not stayed Mandalore this long by letting his passions reign. He gave a single nod of acceptance.

“Very good,” smiled Havok. “With that out of the way, we can discuss details.”

“We won’t help you for cheap.”

“I already said you’d be paid. You should know by now, the Sith *do* keep their promises.”

When the Darth Havok left, Yaga Auchs stayed inside the warehouse, helmet tucked underarm, thinking. The moment the Sith had announced his arrival he’d feared something like this, and he’d known it was coming ever since he learned the full truth of Maladi’s scheme. It was true that neither he nor Thorum Rhal had understood her virus when they’d helped her spread it, but when Yaga had heard the truth from Empress Fel’s own broadcast, he’d broken out in gleeful laughter.

He hadn’t been able to help himself, even as he’d realized the Sith- the *real* Sith, the ones Maladi had betrayed- would seek recompense. Rhal and all his other lieutenants had been suffused with joy for days over the news. For millennia, the *shabla* Jedi and Sith had warred with each other, dragging the galaxy into one bloody conflict after another. The Mandalorians made good coin off those wars, but unlike the Force-users they’d never kidded themselves they were fighting for a greater purpose. Many Mandos admitted reluctant respect for those Force-users’ combat abilities, but the mystic jibberish and self-righteous platitudes they used to justify their wars made them objects of contempt. Now, in the blink of an eye, their orders were extinct, their vaunted knights and lords turned into hapless mortals, and even without knowing it, the Mandalorians had played a part in their downfall. It was hard not to feel some pride.

The problem was that, even without their Force, the Sith still had power over him.

Yaga watched the door from the office open. Sora stepped toward him, wrenching off her helmet and shaking loose matted brown hair. The young woman said, “He’s gone, *buir*. I didn’t see anyone shadowing him either.”

“I didn’t think there would be.”

“He was brave coming here alone. Or arrogant.”

“No, just smart,” Yaga said. “You heard it all?”

His daughter patted the side of her helmet. Its audio transceiver had been patched into his, which had recorded the whole conversation. That meant she'd even heard the audio of her father admitting to killing Chernan Ordo. Sora already knew about that; he'd told her himself not long after he'd done the deed. She'd been a child then, not even ten standard years, but he'd told her because she deserved to know. He wanted no secrets between them, just as she'd had none with his father.

"Even without the Force the Sith are dangerous," he said.

"Nothing a blaster to the head won't stop."

"You could kill Havok but the Sith still have proof of what I did. They'll always have proof."

And that meant he was still trapped beneath them. He'd known when the Sith first came to him, that it would end like this, but he'd been desperate. He'd been chafing as a hanger-on to Chernan Ordo and hated the way he was dragging the Mandalorians into the Imperial-Alliance war. Then Darth Maladi had come to him, offering to make him *Mand'alor* and keep his people out of the fight. All he'd had to do was betray Ordo.

He'd known it was a bad offer, but he'd taken it anyway. He'd been young and ambitious and smoldering with inner anger and it had overridden his hatred for Force-users. He'd thought he could use them better than they'd used him, and for a while it seemed he'd succeeded. That illusion was gone.

"So we'll do what he said?" asked Sora.

"We'll give him his mercenaries." Throwing the Mandos into whatever the Sith and Nagai were doing would reverse all their isolationism of the past decade. Some of his lieutenants, like Thorum Rhal, would approve. Others, like Vaun Zerminar, would object but comply anyway. All would wonder what had come over their *Mand'alor*.

"I heard the Nagai took over most of the Saijo sector and are moving into Setia," Sora said. "Those are a lot of nothing planets, but Coruscant's going to have to act."

"That's why the Sith want us there."

"How do they think they can hold that territory, even with us? The Imperial and Alliance fleets combined could retake those sectors in a week."

“Don’t underestimate the Sith. They make layers of schemes. They’ll start sowing problems on Coruscant, just watch.”

“Sith *chakaare*,” the young woman shook her head. “You’d think without their *shabla* Force they’d be done mucking up the galaxy.”

“It’s the only thing they know how to do.”

“A blaster to the head would fix them all.”

Sora’s thinking was crude and brutal, like most young Mandalorians, but she was ultimately right. Without their powers they could die as easily as anyone, and with them all dead the galaxy would be a better place. Unfortunately, that wasn’t something Yaga could accomplish without destroying himself and his daughter.

“Someone has to pay our bills,” he grunted. “So we’ll go along with them for now. We’ll help them fight their war.”

“And look for a way out?”

Yaga doubted they’d find one, but he nodded just to see hope in her eyes. “We’ll do what we can.”

During his talk with Havok he’d been tempted to just take out his blaster and put a bolt between the Iktotchi’s eyes. Liberation from the hold the Sith had on him would have felt eminently satisfying at first, but in the end, it wouldn’t just be Yaga himself who paid for Chernan Ordo’s death. It would be his daughter too.

He knew that from experience. He’d joined his own father Kaynar in the quest to avenge his uncle and restore some honor to the Auchs family name. Even at the time he’d understood that his father had been driven less by grief for Gevern than by the shame of having failed his clan. Because of that shame, he’d brought his son with him to ruin.

Yaga had been fourteen when he’d watched a Force-user in red Mandalorian armor attack and kill his father. She’d shot down their freighter, jolted him with dark Force lighting, slashed a knife across his throat, then walked out of their crashed ship, leaving young Yaga frozen in horror. He could still remember his father’s arterial blood splashing against the T-visor of her helmet.

He didn’t know what Force-user cult she’d belonged to or even her name. Literally faceless, the woman was a red

nightmare dogging his memories, even after all these years. Thought of her still filled him with terror.

Yaga loved his father, revered him, but he wouldn't make the same mistakes as Kaynar Auchs. He wouldn't let his passions drive him to error and he wouldn't pass on his sins to his daughter. It seemed an impossible task, but he owed Sora a better legacy than the one he'd inherited.

If he were ever free of these Sith, he might even give it to her.

Chapter Six

News of the attacks in the Saijo and Setia sectors produced only mild buzz on Coruscant. The news-nets and their audience were much more interested in the brewing race for senate speaker, and by Gar Stazi's count, they devoted seven minutes to talking heads praising or slandering candidates for every one minute they gave to the Outer Rim conflict. He recalled a similar public apathy the last time the Nagai went on a rampage, before the Sith-Imperial War.

Stazi couldn't help but wonder if there was a connection, and he wasn't alone. When he met with a collection of senior officers to discuss the situation, Ona Antilles said, "Reports are sketchy, but some suggest the Nagai are being led by a warlord named Relik K'sharn. Wasn't he reported killed fifteen years ago?"

The human woman was too young to have fought in that war herself, but Stazi had been there to personally smash the Nagai fleet at Terminus. He'd done it in conjunction with the Imperials then; just months later, their fleets had started trading blows over the Jedi and the failure of the Ossus Project. It seemed like another life.

"There was never any verification that K'sharn was killed," Stazi said, "But nothing to suggest he survived."

"So he's been in hiding all this time?" frowned Anj Dahl. Another young human, but hardly as stern as Antilles, she was leader of the pilot/commando team Rogue Squadron.

"It makes little sense with the intel we've been given," Antilles shook her head.

"Then we'll have to wait until we get more."

Stazi looked across the briefing table to the two admirals in the room. In the course of the war against Krayt, the Weequay Jhoram Bey had ascended from Rogue Leader to captain of Stazi's flagship *Alliance*. Afterward Stazi had promoted him to admiral, and he held that rank along with Slossar, a Sluissi who'd commanded the Alliance's Fourth Fleet against the Empire and spent the following decade in an internment camp. The toll of those years were evident in the black patch over Slossar's right eye, but his command ability and devotion to Alliance principles were undamaged.

"Gentlebeings," Stazi said, "I've spoken with the empress. We've agreed it's in our authority to act without consulting the senate, and that's precisely what we'll do. We've also agreed this will be a *joint* mission, using elements from both the Imperial and Alliance forces."

"Just like the *last* time the Nagai went on a raiding spree," said Bey. "This seems curiously... repetitive."

"For our sakes, I hope it is. We crushed them at Terminus and that was the end of it." Stazi shifted his gaze to the Sluissi. "Admiral Slossar, as my senior commander, I want you to take point on this offensive. You'll be working with General Jaeger."

Slossar long tail twirled, a sign of approval from his kind. Among the empress's commanders, some were eager to work with Alliance officers while others were the worst kind of old Imperial snobs. Oron Jaeger thankfully belonged to the former group.

"I'll let you communicate with him directly," Stazi said. "You have two standard days to apportion your forces and decide on a battle plan. We don't expect you to finish the Nagai in one fight, but we hope to be pushing them back by the time the senate holds its election."

"The senate doesn't seem to care much about what's going on in the Saijo sector," remarked Antilles.

"It's on the very rim of the Rim. Half the senators couldn't find Saijo on a map," Anj Dahl shrugged. "Look on the bright side. If we can get this under control fast, it'll be a good team-building exercise between us and the Imps. And if we make a few mistakes, well, it's not like the politicians and media are going to be paying attention."

Jhoram Bey had once said Anj had a gift for optimism. Stazi tried to share it. "Occasionally widespread apathy can be a good thing," he agreed. "Admiral Slossar, I'll leave the bulk of the planning to you. The empress and I expect a joint battle plan by the time you leave Coruscant. Admiral Bey, Captains Dahl and Antilles, I want you to monitor this situation. Work with our friends in intelligence and gather every scrap of information about these Nagai. If we can determine whether Relik K'sharn is alive, all the better."

"That should keep us busy," Bey said. "And you, Admiral?"

Stazi's smile was tight. "I don't have much time to *be* an admiral anymore.

"You say that like you envy us."

In a way he did. In the larger scheme, it was good that his life now was more politics than war. That didn't keep him from missing combat's clear objectives and attainable goals.

"Let's just say my heart will go with you," he said. "I have fights of my own to keep me busy."

The election for speaker of the senate was still a week away, and for Marasiah it couldn't come too soon. Having to oversee its sessions until the speaker was appointed was troublesome enough, but worse was the pressure coming from all sides to influence the vote. Senator Eldon had been relatively circumspect in his approach; his press team had contacted Marasiah a mere twelve times trying to schedule a joint public appearances than would- so the press team insisted- not be related the election at all. Other Imperial senators were more vocal about supporting Bastion's own for speaker. Her briefing with the senior military commanders over the Nagai situation had turned halfway through into a debate over how much influence the senate should have in military affairs long-term (currently it was zero) and whether the senate really should exist at all. Even relatively open-minded ones like General Jaeger had seemed rankled by the new body.

Marasiah was relieved to retreat to her office, where the only person she'd have to spar with was a man she'd known and trusted all her life, her uncle Hogrum Chalk.

“Frankly, I think all parties are making too much of the speaker’s election,” her uncle said. “Of course, that’s one of the prime purposes of democracy. It allows people the thrill of historical agency. Whether they actually have it matters less than whether they can convince themselves they’re empowered.”

Dressed in loose black clothes that obscured some of the cybernetic grafts he’d received after a near-fatal shuttle accident, Hogrum paced slowly in front of her desk. When he looked at Marasiah the gold of late afternoon glinted off his metal eyepiece.

“The senate will have a great say in many matters,” she replied from her seat.

“It has as much as you’ll allow,” he said. In their long discussions he’d agreed that some legislature needed to exist, if only to take some weight off the executive branch, but he’d warned against handing it major powers.

“It has what it’s been given,” she said.

“It’s been given enough. But that’s all right.” His scarred face relaxed its frown. “People want the feeling of agency, of having a say in government. They also like swift, decisive action, so long as it gives them what they want. In your position you can still deliver plenty of the latter.”

“I’ve already talked with Stazi and my admirals. They’ll be sending a task force against the Nagai in days.”

“That’s good. I hope you arranged for a celebratory send-off.”

She smiled faintly. “I thought you were my intelligence director, uncle. Are you handling public relations now?”

“The simple fact is that no one cares about what the Nagai are doing right now. It’s a minor, localized conflict that’s only rattling a slice of the Outer Rim. Once we smash them, you’ll need to play it up as a major joint victory for the Alliance and Imperial fleets.”

“I was already planning that. I *did* learn some things about ruling from my parents.”

“Of course.” He added, “I admired how you seized control of the situation the other day in the senate. You need to act on the refugee issue quickly and show progress before the senate elects its speaker. That way you can claim the credit.”

She'd already been thinking on those lines, but the preliminary survey taken by her hastily-arranged commission had sobered her bravado.

"There's a reason we haven't found a home for the refugees yet. Local governments refuse to take them. They scrape and apologize, and they offer other forms of aid, but no one wants to give up their oceans for the Mon Calamari and the Quarren."

"Then as empress you force them to. With a smile and a velvet glove, but you still force them."

"It's still not simple," she shook her head. "There are thousands of ocean worlds, but only a fraction of them consist of a water type healthy for both Quarren and Mon Calamari. Many of those already have native sentients. The ones that don't have natives have settlers. Many of *those* worlds have large tourism industries, or underwater mining operations they don't want soiled."

"And if they put up a fuss about giving some of their pretty water over to the refugees, you can paint them as horrible and selfish."

"And they'll paint me as a tyrant who stomps over planetary rights."

"Politics is always dirty. You just have to be prepared for the muck that comes with it."

Marasiah held back a sigh. It had been a long day and she'd had enough of arguing. "I see your point, uncle. And I'll think about your suggestion."

He nodded, satisfied. "In politics, perception matters more than reality. You have a week before the election. If you can present yourself as a moral, benevolent leader who's actively concerned about governing for and with her people, you can compel their obedience."

Marasiah believed she was doing just that, and it rankled that she'd have to put on a show to prove it. But her uncle was right, as he usually was. He left her with those thoughts, but she didn't stay long in the office. As the sun she retreated to her quarters near the top of the palace complex, where her husband had just finished preparing a meal. Antares didn't strike most people as being a skilled cook, and she loved him for his hidden talents.

He needed activities like that to take his mind off things. For Marasiah, the affairs of state could distract her from the plague. Antares had no such thing. She'd done her best to assign new duties to her Knights, but even so, her elite protectors had been reduced to ceremonial bodyguards. Some she sent off Coruscant on special tasks, but she had few such jobs to give them. Without the Force, there was little reason to send them over her veteran intelligence agents.

That feeling of uselessness was a black hole at the heart of every Knights now, threatening to suck them down. That pull was all the stronger because there was no crisis to throw them at, even if they'd had the Force. When Maladi's disease struck, they'd all been filled with terror that the Force's silence would upend the galaxy. Nearly a year had gone by and no disaster had occurred. The new government was still assembling itself, awkwardly but peaceably. Brush fires like the Nagai raids could be snuffed out. All their lives, they'd believed the galaxy needed them. Now it seemed possible that the galaxy would get along fine without its Force-users, and that was a special humiliation.

Antares never said this aloud; he'd never been articulate with his feelings. She could read it on his face, and in the Force. Her husband was a man who lived to serve a higher cause. First it had been Roan Fel. Then, when her father has fallen to his demons, Antares had served the ideal he'd represented. Now he served it in Marasiah. He was a reminder that she must always stay on the path of light. Now that she was one of the last Force-users in the galaxy, it was more important than ever.

After dinner they stood on the balcony and watched nighttime traffic move on the outskirts of the government district. As they leaved over the rail and savored cool wind she began telling him about all her days' events. Antares commented only rarely. She unloaded, and he listened. It had become their ritual.

Once she was done he said, "Your uncle was right about the last part. Your promise to the senate got you a lot of goodwill. Now you have to follow through with it."

"I suppose," she sighed. "We can't have the senate getting credit for any good deeds, can we?"

"It's not that," he said. "The Mon Calamari and Quarren need a place of their own. Everyone can see it. Everyone agrees it's right. As empress, you're the only one with power to *make* someone share their world with the refugees. No one will hold that against you."

"Except those I make share."

"The senate won't be able to force through that kind of decision. You can." He squeezed her hand gently. "It's the right thing to do, Sia."

She squeezed back. In all the day's argument, she didn't think anyone had used that simple justification. Of course it had been Antares who'd done it, and not because he was simple himself. He was a complex man with conflicting desires, but he *aimed* for simplicity. He always tried to cut through complications and find a noble end.

"The committee selected a list of fifty different worlds to review," she told him. "Some have natives, some settlers. Some have industry, others none. They all have gravity and water content similar to Dac's, but that's the only thing they have in common."

"Select one and make your decree."

"It's not that simple."

Then Marasiah recalled something else her uncle had said; that she had to be present herself as governing for and *with* the people. Since becoming empress she'd rarely left Coruscant. She'd known that was a mistake and planned to rectify it, but duties always got in the way.

She squeezed his hand again and said, "Maybe we should take a vacation."

"To a water world?"

"It wouldn't be much of a vacation. I'd have to meet with local officials, hack out a policy..."

"But it would be a change of pace." He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "It sounds like a lovely idea, Sia."

"I thought you'd like it." Hand still in his, she stepped from the balcony and tugged him inside. "Come, let's look at our choices. I have a long list to pick from..."

Before the formal convocation meal in the gathering room in Bakura's executive complex, President Recado had told

his guests from Coruscant that it would be a banquet unlike any they'd attended before. Shado Vao hadn't expected him to be so right.

The guests were a mix of visitors and local officials. Aside from Shado and Storrs from Coruscant, and President Recado himself, there were the highest-ranked human and Kurtzen legislators and General Koregion, the human head of the Bakura Defense Fleet. The P'w'eck were represented by their chief legislator and negotiator Vlothaw, a two-meter-tall, brown-scaled saurian. The Ssi-ruuk representative Oviyekkis was a full meter higher, one-third more massive, and coated in deep-blue iridescent scales. Because of their size and physiology that squatted on their haunches instead of sitting in chairs. Both communicated solely through whistles and fluting noises, and their statements were translated by Shado's earpiece.

Eating was the strangest part. Shado, Storr, and the human guests were all served local dishes mixing native fruits, greens, and game. Vlothaw and Oviyekkis, meanwhile, were provided with trays of raw meat. While Shado picked at his food with fork and knife, the saurians bent their snouts low and tore off mouthfuls of flesh with rows of serrated teeth. They barely chewed before swallowing, and had both devoured their trays in minutes, after which a second helping was brought out. The sight, combined with the strange smell the aliens emanated, combined to ruin Shado's appetite, but he forced himself to eat as much as he could. Recado and the other locals seemed a little more used to the thing and Storr, practiced diplomat that he was, kept up polite talk through the whole exchange.

The conversation started with bland niceties but gradually became peppered with more pointed exchanges. At one point Storr said, "I'm glad our peoples could sit down like civilized beings for once. I'd like it if the ambassador would tell us more about the new outlook on Lwhekk."

Oviyekkis' nostrils flared. The translator in Shado's ear chirped over his whistling: "The P'w'eck are our brothers. We have badly mistreated them in the past and wish to welcome them into a new Imperium."

"That's encouraging, of course, and some P'w'eck seem eager for reunification. But I was hoping you could elaborate on *why* they should trust you."

"We understand them as no others can," said the Ssi-ruuk. "We offer them more than you ever could."

"Kind words are the start of progress, but they always need to be backed by action," Storr smiled blandly. "I'm sure you've outlined some of that to our P'w'eck friends. I wish you could enlighten us too."

Ovipekkis made a cry so shrill it made Shado jump in his seat. The translator's bland voice said, "Those without our shared history cannot understand. You cannot understand."

Vlothaw added, "He is correct. It is a complicated offer, but the Ssi-ruuk are giving considerable reparations for what they've done."

"And that's more enticing than the thriving business you've built on Bakura?" asked Storr.

Vlothaw blinked triple-layered eyelids. "That is what we are deciding."

President Recado coughed to draw attention. "We all understand the allure of seeing justice done. We want to see wrongs righted and balance served. But haven't you considered that balance is *already* served in the union here on Bakura? Oh, it's a fragile balance, but as a whole I really think it's served our peoples well. Are you willing to give up what you have?"

Vlothaw blinked again. "That is our choice to make. Not yours."

"Well, that's one points of view." Recado glanced at the general seated beside him. "But we have to look out for our own interests. I think it's best for all us if they coincidence."

Ovipekkis fluted loudly. "That sounds like a threat, human."

"Balance is not always a pretty thing." Recado shrugged. "Maybe it never is. Yet somehow we all seek it. Curious, yes?"

Shado decided he had to speak up. "One group's gain doesn't have to be the other's loss. I firmly believe there's a way we can work in harmony so that all our people can benefit."

Recado restrained a scowl. Storr raised his glass and said, "I believe that as well. So does Coruscant, which will do anything it can to facilitate a happy resolution for all parties."

"I'll drink to that." General Koregion lifted his wine-glass.

The Ssi-ruuk and P'w'eck had no glasses to toast, but they fluted in reply. Vlothaw said, "My people have observed the wisdom of the Jedi before and found it valid. I hope it continued to be so."

Shado almost felt good, but the conversation fell into another lull. He didn't need to Force to read awkwardness in the room. After another half-hour of perfunctory talk, the banquet began to break up.

As Shado and Storr began making their way to their living quarters, the diplomat rested a hand on Shado's arm and said quietly, "I appreciate your optimism, Master Jedi, but during formal talks tomorrow, please let me lead the discussion. There are certain things Coruscant wants me to make sure I address and I've constructed a schedule of topics I'd like to stick to."

"Of course," Shado said.

"Thank you for understanding," Storr withdrew his hand. "I recommend an early sleep tonight. Tomorrow looks to be a long day."

Shado nodded. He didn't miss that Storr had just put him in his place, politely but firmly. He wondered what the Imperial really felt behind that diplomatic veneer; whether he thought Shado was a useless burden, whether he'd ever liked Jedi at all. He had a feeling that, even with the Force, Storr would be a hard man to read.

After they reached the residential quarter they went into their separate rooms. Shado found himself restless; if he was going to be Storr's silent shadow the entire time he might as well have stayed on Coruscant with the other Force-deaf Jedi. He'd still be stewing in the same sense of uselessness. His mind drew back to Recado and all that talk of balance. The president was also hard to get a read on. The little man seemed weirdly resigned to whatever way this crisis would resolve. Perhaps he was just a pessimist, bracing himself for the worst, but Shado expected a politician to at least feign can-do optimism.

Shado room included a communications suit that patched in directly with the highest on-duty security officer. Sitting in the dark beside the console he tapped it on. "This is Shado Vao of the Federation delegation. I have a request."

"How can we help you, Master Vao?"

"I was wondering if the president is available to speak in-person, privately. I'll submit to security checks, naturally."

There was a short pause. "I'd have to check with the president."

"Of course. Take your time."

The line went dead, and Shado sat for another ten minutes with no response. He didn't bother to turn on the light. Eventually the comm buzzed again and the same voice replied, "The president is willing to speak with you. A security officer is on the way to your quarters now."

"Thanks you." Shado added, "Please make sure you call on the right room. Ambassador Storrs went to bed early and doesn't want to be disturbed."

"Of course, Master Jedi."

Shado waited five minutes more for the guard to show up. From there he expected to be taken up to the president's office, but instead he was led outside, into the damp night air, and whisked away to the edge of the government complex, through a guarded gate, and up to the squat white building which, he realized, must be the president's home.

The security officer let him inside and escorted him all the way to the president's study. It was a homey room, with wood-paneled walls and a handful of glowlamps set to low level, as though simulating comfortable firelight. Recado himself was reclining in a chair beside a lamp. He gestured for Shado to take the seat opposite. As he did, the officer left the room, leaving them alone.

Recado seemed to sink further in his chair. "Well, Master Jedi. You wanted to speak to me. Here I am."

"Thank you for taking time." Shado sat straight-backed, hands on his thighs. "I apologize if this was an inconvenience."

Recado waved a hand. "You don't have to be formal. Storrs isn't here, so I expect this is some kind of personal talk you want to have."

Shado watched him carefully. "Have you ever met a Jedi before, sir?"

"No. I have not." Recado paused. "Am I meeting one now?"

"I certainly hope so."

The old man's response was an ambiguous smile. "I understand Coruscant sent you here to help arbitration. We certainly need it. Are you here as Storr's partner? Assistant? Counselor? To be honest, no one's made that clear."

"Something of all three, I think."

"You think." His brows narrowed. "Why are you in my study, Master Jedi?"

Recado seemed to want honesty. Shado decided to give it. "Sir, for someone whose entire planet depends on these negotiations, you don't seem to care much how they turn out."

The old man stared at him for a long moment. Then he snorted laughter and sunk further into his chair. "You Jedi must be *useless* without your powers. Of course I care. I haven't had a sound night's sleep in weeks."

"Why do you keep talking about balance?"

"Ah. So that's it. I don't suppose they taught you much about the Cosmic Balance and the teachings of Dif Istuvi back at Jedi school."

"No, but the Jedi had ideas about balance to the Force. Do you want to enlighten me about yours?"

Recado watched stroked his gray beard. "The universe is something that *is*. It has a natural state, a natural way to be."

"That sounds like the Force."

"Living beings act on it. When they act, balance gets upset. The universe counters and returns balance. Bad luck returns on good luck. When two people fall in love, another pair is separated. And if one planet gains a great boon, another loses it. It all comes down to zero in the end."

"That's a bleak way of looking at things."

"Is it? Everyone blessed by life has to pay for it one day by dying. Don't you agree?"

"That's different."

"It's the most fundamental fact of existence." Recado shrugged again. "Jedi never thought much of the Balance."

They have their own ideas about light and dark, but to be honest, the details always eluded me.”

Shado hunched forward. “We believe the will of the Force is the will of the universe. Being a Jedi and following its light side is about moving with that will, facilitating it. Working against it- breaking the balance, if you will- is the dark side. When Jedi talk about balance we mean protecting justice and peace, in our hearts and in the wider galaxy, not some zero-sum game.”

The old man’s eyes narrowed. “And how do you know when you’re working with the Force or against it?”

Shado tapped two fingers at his heart. “We can feel the difference between dark and light, in here.”

“You *could* feel it. Past tense.”

“Yes,” Shado admitted. “But I remember what it feels like. I remember what actions used to be right.”

“I see.” Recado scratched his beard again. “That seems... convenient.”

He blinked. “What does?”

“Jedi work the will of the Force. They know it’s the will of the Force because they’re working it. That’s rather circular logic, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not.” He tapped his chest again. “When we’re working against it, we *know*. The dark side of the Force... affects those who use it very differently.”

“Makes them Sith, you mean.”

“Yes. But the point is, we know. The light and dark side exist. They’re not just words we use to justify our actions.”

Recado smiled tightly. “Maybe if I could feel the Force I’d feel differently. But to a lot of us who can’t- especially all the people who ended up dead in the past few wars- it looks like you Jedi and Sith do whatever you damn well please, and invoke your Force as justification. You’d be no different than mere mortals in that respect. Most people do what they want and tell themselves they have noble reasons after the fact.”

Shado’s chest tightened with anger. “If you *could* feel the Force, you’d know otherwise.”

“Maybe, but I’ll never get the chance now. The question is, will you?”

"I don't know. There are... many ways people are trying to get the Force back." He thought on all the scientists on Coruscant, Cade wandering the galaxy in search of Khat Lah. Neither quest filled him with hope. "Until then I'll do everything I can to continue acting as a Jedi."

"And without that feeling in your chest telling you you're doing the right thing, how will you know you're doing it?"

He wouldn't; every step he took was a fumbling act he could only hope followed a Force he could not hear. Every time he thought about that he felt crushed by an awful loneliness.

For this strange old man sitting before him in the dark, Shado attempted a brave smile. "That's my act of faith."

"And your faith directs you to find a happy outcome for everyone on Bakura?"

"Every life in the galaxy. Human. Kurtzen. P'w'eck. Ssi-ruuk."

"That's a lofty goal. I'm doing what I can for Bakura. Lwhekk be damned. And if I have to chose, I'll protect the humans and Kurtzen over P'w'eck. If someone else has to suffer so my Bakura can prosper, so be it. That's the inevitable results of our success." He leavened his words with a smile. "One thing you have to admit about the Cosmic Balance: it's more practical."

"No," Shado said, "Just cynical."

Recado was still smiling. "Are all Jedi such stubborn idealists?"

"I think it's because we feel a part of something bigger than ourselves."

"Feel, or felt?"

When Shado didn't reply, Recado pushed his body up from the chair. He stepped slowly to the door, signaling the end of the conversation. Yet when Shado rose the old man extended a hand to shake.

"Thank you for coming, Master Jedi," he said. "That was a nice change of pace. Most bureaucrats and politicians are awful at discussing higher things."

Shado looked at the hand for a second, then shook. "I'm going to do everything I can here to make things work out for everyone."

"I'm sure you will." Recado squeezed hard and released. "One last bit of cynicism: Idealism can be the most insidious form of vanity."

Shado stared for a moment, uncertain what to say. Recado cleared his throat loudly, and the security officer appeared behind Shado to usher him outside.

"Good night, Master Jedi," Recado said as he retreated to his chair. "Pleasant dreams."

Shado nodded and followed the guard into the cool night air. He remembered what Recado had said about his own sleep and doubted his would fare much better.

After making his stop at Mandalore, Darth Havok had expected to ride Coreward to the galactic capital. Instead a sudden hail from Darth Nihl had sent him in the opposite direction, climbing Rimward up the Perlemian Trade Route. In a way he was glad for the long ride. He needed time to absorb the ramifications of his orders.

Vorzyd V was one of the entertainment headquarters of the Outer Rim, and from the high window of the High Numbers casino, Havok could see an impressively gaudy thoroughfare thick with speeder traffic, lined by multi-colored holo-displays and luminous signboards ten storeys high. He'd never been distracted by flashiness or idle pleasures, even before joining the Sith, and he turned away from them to face Vigo Pleshchai, owner of the casino and most powerful Black Sun captain in this half of the Rim. The fat, yellow-skinned Squalris sat behind his desk, dressed in an eminently fashionable black business-suit. His hands were clasped on his round stomach and his small black eyes watched Havok intently.

"I don't give compliments lightly," the vigo said. "But you're a brave man coming here."

"Thank you."

"You might also be very stupid. I'll decide that in a moment. Let's get to the point. Why shouldn't I hand you over to the nearest authorities? The Federation would pay handsomely for a Sith." Pleshchai drummed thick fingers on the desktop. "One signal from me and you'd have four

assassin droids with guns drawn on you. I doubt you could do much, given your current, mmm.... *debilitated* state.”

This was the first obstacle Havok had planned for. “Our organizations have worked well together before.”

“I know. I got great help several times from that lithesome Twi’lek who always forgot to put her clothes on. What happened to her? Not dead, I hope.”

“She’s busy elsewhere. But yes, our organizations have history, which the Sith have kept well-documented.”

Auchs hadn’t taken well toward attempted blackmail. Neither did Pleshchai. The vigo’s hands balled to fists. “The days when your cult could extort special favors from Black Sun are over.”

“We don’t want favors. Only to continue a partnership. Naturally, we’re willing to pay you for your work, but I think this job will be mutually beneficial.”

“Oh, and what is that?”

Havok stepped a little closer to the desk. “As you’ve probably heard, Marasiah Fel will be leaving Coruscant soon. She’s pledged to settle refugees from Dac on a new planet and she’s paying a personal visit to the Mid-rim world of Bavinyar. She’s set to arrive there in two standard days and meet with, and probably strong-arm, local officials.”

“I heard.” Pleshchai snorted. “I pity the Bavinyari, having to take in that rabble.”

“As a potential home, Bavinyar makes sense. It’s populated by humans and Cereans and has no native sentients. The settlers stick to Bavinyar’s islands, which make up, oh, less than five percent of its total surface area. There’s been a small amount of undersea mining, but over ninety percent of Bavinyar is, essentially, unused real estate.”

“The Bavinyari will still resist. Nobody likes have squatters set up in the house nextdoor. But that’s beside the point. The empress will be on Bavinyar. What of it?”

“If she’ll be away from Coruscant, that means she’ll be vulnerable.”

Pleshchai’s eyes widened as he understood. Here Havok had expected the vigo to snap objection, or to outright refuse. Instead his jowls bunched tight in thought. Nihl was right; this crime lord could see the bigger picture.

Still, when he spoke his voice dripped skepticism. "You want to use Black Sun to assassinate the leader of the Galactic Federation?"

"I want there to be an attempt. The success is... secondary."

"Secondary to what? Successful or no, it'll bring a mountain down on our heads. Black Sun's still regaining strength."

"You *were* regaining strength under Darth Krayt," Havok reminded. "But since Marasia Fel took office, she's been putting a heavy squeeze on your activities, hasn't she?"

It was true, but Pleshchai played confident. He looked around his lush office and said, "I'm managing well enough, thank you. When it comes to galactic politics, Black Sun's learned to stay low and stay out of the way."

"You mean your assassins can't cover their tracks? I thought yours were the best."

Pleshchai scowled. "Don't play games with me, Sith. Explain to me why we should risk bringing the whole Federation down on us. It should be good for a laugh."

"Because the Federation won't come down on you." Havok calmly folded his hands in front of him. "Successful or not, the assassination attempt must appear- very credibly- to have been the work of pro-Alliance extremists."

Pleshchai took his time to think on that one. "Is there anyone specific you have in mind?"

"Oh, one or two of the newly-elected senators should be complicit. Someone close to Tem Brighton. Senator Porat Derrol, for example, is said to have close ties with Gar Stazi. And then there's Nelloran, from the Senex sector. You know his people are prone to violent extremism. I was going to recommend hiring a competent third party to actually do the deed. Maybe you should pretend to be working for said senators when you hire them. Or you could send a Black Sun assassins, then silence them once the job is done."

"Black Sun knows how to do its business," Pleshchai said.

"Then you should know that this is exactly the right time to sow discord inside the Federation. Once it descends into chaos, Black Sun will have all the more room to flourish. And naturally, it will benefit the Sith too."

Pleshchai sunk into his chair. "And would the Sith prefer Marasiah Fel survive, or not?"

"The Sith are amenable," Havok said, "But we'd prefer it if she live. The empress has tried to play conciliator between the Federation's factions. That will be much harder once she gets splashed with someone else's blood. If we break her appearance as the Federation's high arbiter, we break the Federation."

Pleshchai thought on that. It was what Nihl suggested he say, but a part of Havok would prefer it if the empress died on Bavinyar. He'd killed the woman's mother himself, later captured and tortured Marasiah herself. Both acts have brought to him a sense of triumph, carried by the Force's dark side. Now that its power had deserted him, Marasiah was a lingering reminder of what he'd done and failed to do. He simply wanted her gone, any was possible.

Eventually the vigo said, "This will take time to arrange."

"You only have a few days. If you're serious about this, I suggest you start planning immediately."

Pleshchai's black eyes settled on his. "We still need to talk about your initial down-payment."

Havok felt a flush of triumph. "I'm happy to negotiate. We Sith are still Sith, no matter what you may have heard. We value our old partnerships and look forward to working together for a long time to come."

Chapter Seven

It was just before sunrise local time when *Free Agent* returned to the camp on Concord Dawn. The ship was a great black silhouette against an eastern sky burning red and gold, and as soon as it was on the ground some of Marin's people started drawing a broad camouflage net over its hull. The same netting was stretched over the other ships at the encampment, including Marin's own *Starlight Champion*, ensuring that satellites and ships that flew over their location would see only an unremarkable farm.

Ania was the first one down its ramp followed by her Mon Cal companion and her towering, disturbing polite assassin droid. When she saw her mother standing at the entrance to the settlement's central building, she trotted ahead.

"Up early?" Ania asked, "Or out late?"

"Early," Marin said. "Have you gotten anything new from Volgma?"

"Nothing since we left Denon." Ania stuffed hands in her jacket pockets. Her posture and the way she couldn't quite meet her mother's eye reminded Marin of an awkward teenager, and she felt a pang of hurt for having missed that part of her daughter's life.

"Well, that's good," Marin said. "He'll contact you whenever he gets a response from Vedo?"

"Right." Ania glanced over her shoulder. Sauk and AG-37 remained five meters back, apparently uncertain what to do.

Marin stepped aside and called, "You probably want a fresh-cooked meal. Go on ahead."

Sauk headed inside. AG-37 said, “No such meal is necessary, but I appreciate the hospitality all the same.”

The assassin droid had to stoop to fit his conical head through the doorframe. Ania had described the how and why she’d come to have a three-meter-tall metal protector following her around. It was an incredible story, but if he was the only legacy Ania had inherited from her family, Marin envied her for it.

Ania didn’t follow the others. Standing outside in the pre-dawn light, hands still stuffed into jacket pockets, she asked, “So why are you up early?”

“I’m preparing for a trip, actually.” Marin nodded to the ship berthed next to *Free Agent*. Her own *Starlight Champion*, inherited from her father, currently sat with the camo net draped over its wide wings, but the loading ramp slanting sideways out from under the angular cockpit was extended.

“A trip,” Ania repeated. Her tone combined disappointment and acceptance. “Where to?”

“Breshig,” Marin said. “Not far from here. There’s an old associate of Auch’s I need to pay a visit to.”

“Are you sure it’s safe?”

“Your cousin Liem’s coming with me. He’s running a few checks on *Champion* right now.”

“Okay.” Ania looked at the ship, as though expecting the young Mando to drop into view. “Just the two of you?”

“I was going to take Yangar too,” she said, naming another Skirata.

“Are you on a tight schedule?”

“Not exactly,” Marin admitted. “Our guest doesn’t know we’re coming. We were hoping to surprise him by popping in at dawn local time. We still have an hour or two before we go.”

“Ah.” Ania glanced at the sunrise. “You know, that ship’s pretty recognizable.”

“It’s an inheritance from your grandfather.”

“I know. I’m not saying anything bad about *Champion*. It’s just, you know, you take it most places. You’re trying to keep off Auch’s radar but you’re actually making yourself more visible.”

Marin spotted Liem disembark *Champion* and approach them. “Breshig’s like Concord Dawn. No orbital platforms, no flight control. We’ll be in and out before anyone notices.”

“Sure.” Ania said. “I was just thinking you should switch things up now and then.”

Marin understood where this was going. “Are you offering me a ride on *Free Agent*?”

“Well, why not?” Ania shrugged. “We can turn it around in a couple hours. And we don’t have anything better to do or anyplace else to be. Or do we?”

She finally met her mother’s eyes. They both knew Marin had been sending her on milk runs for the past months, keeping Ania at arms’ length from her operations while still participating in them. At first Marin had told herself she was doing it for Ania’s benefit, in case her daughter decided she wasn’t up to helping a Mando insurgency and wanted to cut and run. After all this time Ania was still here and Marin couldn’t deny her real motivation anymore.

As much as she was overjoyed to find her daughter alive after all these years, she was terrified of getting close to her. By involving her husband and daughter with her business at Kashyyyk she’d gotten Bennet killed and changed Ania’s life forever. She didn’t want to risk doing that again. Sometimes she regretted even reuniting with Ania in the first place; it might have been easier on them both to let her keep blissfully assuming her mother was dead.

As Marin struggled for something to say, Liem stepped up and slapped Ania on the shoulder. The young woman jumped, but looked slightly assuaged by her cousin’s smile, bright and winning beneath his trimmed auburn beard. Some of Marin’s people still treated Ania with wary skepticism, but Liem had been friendly with his long-lost cousin from the start.

“Welcome back, *ner vod*,” he said. “How was Denon?”

“Too many people,” said Ania. “But we did what we went there to do.”

“Excellent. Me and your *buir* were about to take a ride to Breshig. Should be back within a Concord day or so.”

“I know.” Ania folded arms over her chest. “Actually, I was volunteering to take her myself. I figure it’s good to

change up ships now and then, since *Champ's* so recognizable."

"Are you now?" Liem turned his smile on Marin, and it seemed less friendly. "She may have a point, *ba'vodu*. You've mostly been sending *Free Agent* on trips outside the Mando sector. Nobody's gonna recognize it."

Liem knew what she'd been doing and he knew why. And, with the impudence of youth, he was trying to push her into a hitching a ride on her daughter's ship for the purpose of family bonding.

"You've already loaded things onto *Champ*," she reminded.

"Not much to load. We're travelling light." He glanced at Ania. "I can move our load over to your ship, can't I?"

"Sure. I can show you exactly where to put it. Let's go get that cargo."

She patted Liem on the back and nudged him toward the ships. The young man broke into an eager trot. Before following Ania gave her mother and over-the-shoulder glance, then a smile. Then she followed Liem.

Marin exhaled into the cool dawn air. She disliked losing arguments, but there were worse fights to lose. A day or so with Ania wouldn't kill her. It might even be the start of something new.

Ania didn't know what she'd expected when she'd invited her mother onto *Free Agent*. She didn't even know what Marin planned to do on Breshig; the woman was being conspicuously evasive and was hard to pin down even in *Free Agent's* cramped space. Once AG-37 piloted them off Concord Dawn and into hyperspace, Ania gave her mother and a quick tour of the ship's insides while Liem stayed in the cockpit and quizzed Sauk and AG-37 on its specs.

Free Agent wasn't a big ship and there wasn't much to see. The cargo they'd transferred from *Starlight Champion* consisted of a single meter-square crate, heavy for its size. Ania wanted to break some ice before asking what was inside but struggled to find a starting place.

As she concluded the tour Marin remarked, "This is a good ship. I imagine A-gee is very... efficient when it comes to improvements."

“Sauk is the real mechanic on here. He could have hired himself out to better ships than this one, but he stayed here. Of course, given that heist we pulled on Socorro, he’d got plenty of credits now, so it all worked out.”

“It’s more than that. Your crew trusts you.”

“It’s not *my* crew. It’s A-gee’s ship.”

Marin shook her head. “If it weren’t for you, they’d be far away now.”

And if it weren’t for *you*, thought Ania, *I’d* be far away now. But she said, “Yeah. I know.”

“What about your friends Jao and Kyra? Have you heard from them?”

“Nothing in weeks. That’s not unusual. I don’t have much to tell them and I don’t think they’ve got much to tell me.”

“So they haven’t made progress finding Khat Lah?”

“Nothing that I’ve heard.” They stood facing each other in the ship’s long central hall. Ania crossed arms over her chest and asked, “Is that important to you, seeing the Force come back?”

“For me it never left, except when I pushed it away.”

“You know, I’ve never seen you *use* the Force except for that one time,” she said, recalling a brief demonstration after they’d first reunited.

“I don’t call on it often.” Marin said slowly, choosing her words. “Most of the people who work with me don’t know I still have it, or ever did. Hondo and the Vevecs don’t. Most of the other Skiratas do, because they understand where I got it. But in general Mandalorians don’t look favorably on Force-users.”

“But that’s not the real reason, is it?” Ania didn’t need magic powers to sense her evasion.

Marin shrugged. “I gave up the Force for many years. It’s a tool that I use when I need it, nothing more.”

That sounded very different from the Force that Jao embraced. To him it was a spiritual thing that not only gave him power but guided his decisions and desires. Kyra, in her fumbling way, had described it as touching the whole of the universe. That kind of mysticism never made much sense to Ania, who’d been focused on the practical since being orphaned at twelve years old.

“Frankly,” Marin said, not quite looking at her, “I wonder if the galaxy might be a better place without the Force. No more Sith emperors taking over the galaxy.”

“No more Jedi and Imperial Knights solving problems either,” Ania said.

“Most problems solve themselves if given the chance. But whatever happens there is beyond me. I know what my concerns are. I know what I have to accomplish. The rest of the galaxy can take care of itself.”

Before Ania could find a response to that, Liem’s voice sounded from the far end of the hall. “*Oya*, looks like we’ve got a hail! A-gee says it’s from Denon!”

“Volgma,” Ania said. Marin was already striding toward the cockpit.

The two women entered to see AG-37 and Liem in the forward seats, a holo-image lit between them. Ania and Marin crowded close to see Volgma’s broad face lit up in flicking blues.

“Greetings,” the Hutt rumbled. “It is good to see you again, Ania Solo. And you, Marin Skirata. I have not seen you in some time. You appear to have aged well, for a human.”

“Thanks for getting back to us, Volgma.” Marin hung off the back of Liem’s seat. “Did you pass on our request?”

“Yes, as well as funds withdrawn prudently from your accounts.” Volgma’s fat tongue swiped one side of his mouth. “Vedo Anjiliac does not work cheaply, and my blood relation only does so much.”

“We understand,” Ania said. “What did he say?”

Volgma gave a thunderous sigh. “It appears that the Anjiliac already had a loyal servant situated inside First Demilla Bank. This made things much easier.”

It also explained the quick turn-around. Ania asked, “What did Vedo’s, um, employee find?”

“Accounts registered at First Demilla are attached to no name. None. Thus their reputation for confidentiality. However, Vedo’s employee located one account that received large deposits on the dates you specified.”

“How large?” asked Marin.

“Excess of five million credits per installment. The one last year was considerably more. Many of those funds were

subsequently transferred to accounts at other unspecified banks.”

“Probably spreading payment to Rhal and his other lieutenants,” Marin said. “Were you able to trace where the money came from?”

“The payments were from different banks, most situated on Muunilinst. And alas, Vedo does not have any agents employed there, though for an extra fee, is he offering to look into those as well.”

Ania had a feeling Vedo’s fees would get exponentially exorbitant. Neither she nor her mother had infinite funds, and she glanced at Marin. The older woman said, “Stand by on that for now. Did Vedo give you the data his agent pulled from First Demilla?”

“Indeed. It is quite illegal and I am glad to be rid of it. I will pass it along with this data-stream.”

“Good. Thank you for all this, Volgma.”

“You are welcome. I have deducted a modest service fee from your account. If you need my help again, please contact me on this line, or visit on Denon.”

Marin leaned close to the console to check if the attachment had been received. “We’ve got it. We’ll let you know where we stand going forward.”

The Hutt bobbed his chins in an attempted nod, then killed the transmission.

Liem leaned back in the co-pilot’s chair. “Muun banks, eh? Those barves are good with confidentiality, too.”

“They’re also legacy Imperial institutions,” Marin added. “They’ve resisted a lot of oversight from Coruscant, even after the Federation got formed. It’s as good a place as any for the Sith to hide their assets.”

“Do you really think you can follow the money trail all the way back to them?” asked Ania. “The account at First Demilla doesn’t even say who the owner is. How will this prove your case against Auchs?”

“It’s a start,” Marin said defensively.

Liem tapped the comm console and brought up the attachment from Volgma. “Looks like Vedo’s agent got us a good data-dump. His guy must be high up the organizational chain.”

“What did he find?” Marin leaned over his shoulder.

“Full list of transactions from Auch’s account, including bank registry numbers from all the deposits and withdraws.”

“Useful if you’ve got people inside every bank in the galaxy,” Ania muttered. As it was, the information seemed terminally incomplete, unless her mother’s visit to Breshig would fill the gaps in some way.

She was about to venture the question when Liem sat up straight, alarmed. Marin asked, “What is it?”

“This data goes all the way up to two days ago. Last thing on the transaction list is a big, big payment from a Muun bank.”

“From two days ago?”

“That’s right.” Liem looked between the two women. “I thought the Sith were down and out.”

“Sith don’t die easily.” Marin’s face went hard.

“But... what does this mean?” asked Ania. “What are they up to?”

She looked straight at her mother, hoping for some answer. This time Marin had none to give, even if she wanted to. The older woman simply scowled and shook her head. Cold weight settled in Ania’s stomach. It seemed what whenever the Sith and Auch were planning, they would have to find out with the rest of the galaxy.

Chapter Eight

When *Mynock* dropped out of hyperspace and descended into Bepin's atmosphere, Kyra was in the cockpit with Cade and Deliah. She stood, clinging tight to the back of the pilot's chair to get the best view of their arrival on a new planet.

This had become her ritual on their crisscrossing of the galaxy, and as far as vistas went, Bepin offered one of the most impressive. They dropped toward layers of clouds that burned red-gold in the setting sun and vectored past tibanna refinery platforms suspended above an endless plunge toward the gas giant's retin core. On the way here C-3PO had explained that most of the planet's layers of gas were poisonous to humans and so dense they could crush *Mynock* to the size of a fist. There was a narrow band where atmospheric pressure and oxygen content created a habitable zone, and it was in this area that several million beings had settled and built floating machinery to extract valuable tibanna from the deeper, high-pressure zones. She'd heard of inhabited gas giants and cities in the clouds, but she'd never imagined what they would look like.

After *Mynock* levelled out they headed toward the final marvel. Cloud City was a thick and elegant disc half-wreathed in auburn clouds, its lower side tapering into a long shaft of repulsors that kept it steadily anchored in Bepin's life zone. A cityscape bristled on the upper side, though as Cade maneuvered them in for landing Kyra saw that many of the buildings were dark and abandoned, their once-elegant façades scarred by rust and worn by neglect. Tall, bright

towers still shone at the city center, but it was clear much of the city in the clouds had fallen from grace.

So it was a rush of wonder, followed by grim settling of reality. A fitting metaphor for their mission, Kyra thought glumly.

The circumstances that had put her on *Mynock* had frankly been a whirlwind, and the initial stages of the journey no less so. Before meeting Jao, Ania, and Cade, her whole life had been spent on Outer Rim backwaters, and while they'd visited plenty of those in the search for Khat Lah, she'd also been exposed to a breadth of history she'd never imagined, all the while learning more about the Jedi and the Force powers they strove to recover.

Yet despite it all, the past ten months had seen hopes quietly fade with each failed mission and empty lead. Nobody had said aloud that they should just give up, even Jariah and Deliah, though Kyra could tell their patience with Cade's vain quest was running low. Those two were trying to sate themselves with small pleasures, like Lehon's sandy beaches or whatever Vong weapons Jariah was going to get on Bespin. For Kyra, Jao, and Lowbacca, stakes were a lot higher and more personal. Supposedly Jariah's friend Chonyo had uncovered an important lead, she so indulged in beleaguered hope.

After they set *Mynock* down in a hopefully-safe part of town, they gathered in the ship's crew lounge. Cade and Jariah had already thrown on longcoats and looked ready to go.

"Okay, we've told Chonyo we're in and he gave us a place to meet him," Cade said. "We're not gonna drag a whole crowd with us, so it'll just be me and Jariah."

"I'd like to come too," Jao said, polite but firm.

Cade got a little smile, like he'd expected that. "Three's a crowd. What, after all this time you don't trust us?"

"I just want to be there to ask Chonyo questions."

"Ah, let him come," Jariah said. "But you're gonna let me and Cade do most of the talking, understand?"

"I won't step on your toes," Jao said.

They'd stepped on each other's toes plenty on this trip, but they also knew when to back off before things got ugly. Cade

grunted, "We'll be off in a couple minutes. Grab your gear and let's go."

"Should we be armed?" asked Jao.

Cade and Jariah exchanged looks. The latter said, "Cloud City's seen better days. You might as well bring your blaster."

Jao nodded. Unlike Lowbacca, who still carried his lightsaber despite losing the Force, Jao used only a sidearm nowadays. His old weapon had been stolen from him by Darth Talon in the frenzied last minutes of Darth Maladi's lab, and he'd pointedly refrained from building another. He clearly felt that he didn't deserve to wield one until he'd regained the Force.

Within minutes, the three men had gathered their gear and trundled out of *Mynock*, leaving the others behind. It was the kind of moment when Kyra felt especially useless, but Deliah popped off the sofa and said, "No point in letting the boys have all the fun. I know a place we can scrounge up some good gear for low prices. Kyra, want to come?"

It was the excuse she'd been waiting for. "I don't see why not."

The Zeltron favored her with a smile. "Then let's get going. I'm sure Lowie and the droids can watch over *Mynock* while we're gone."

That was true enough. Despite proffering his usual wealth of information about Cloud City, C-3PO seemed reluctant to actually step foot in the place. Kyra had no such qualms. She gathered her things and they were out of the ship in minutes. Deliah went out armed, but Kyra refrained from bringing anything. She'd had practice with blasters but the Zeltron was a better crack shot. She'd spent more time practicing with Lowbacca's lightsaber, under instruction from both the Wookiee and Jao, but she couldn't use it without fear of hurting herself.

Thankfully, the environs outside the landing pad didn't seem unsafe. Most of the people and activity took place in the interior portions of the city, and the halls Kyra and Deliah walked through were well-lit, if a little shabby. The inhabitants were a motley group, leaning toward human with plenty of other species mixed in. Some walked fast, like they

needed someplace to be. Others, more shabbily dressed, loitered. A few beings slumped desolate in the halls and panhandled pedestrians.

As they made their way to the market space they passed through dirtier corridors, and places where the lights struggled to stay on. The pedestrians grew scarcer and when they found themselves alone in a long dark hall she asked Deliah softly, "Are you sure this is the right way?"

"I'm just following that map we saw," Deliah said, though she kept one hand near her holstered blaster.

They kept walking, and after turning a corner they saw a brightly-lit section further down the hall, and a few more pedestrians. Kyra allowed a small breath of relief and hurried toward the light.

She only got a few steps before a muffled shout stopped her. Deliah froze too and drew her blaster. They looked around but saw nothing in their hall. The sounds didn't stop, and Kyra backtracked to an intersection they'd just passed. She looked down the right branch to see two figures far down the hall, barely visible in the flickering light. One was on his knees, struggling to rise. The other was pummeling him with angry kicks.

Kyra started down the hall but Deliah grabbed her shoulders and pulled her back. Quiet but very firm, the Zeltron said, "None of our business."

"But they're—"

"You're not a karking Jedi. You don't have to go around solving everyone else's problems."

Even as Deliah tugged her back, Kyra looked down the hall to see the standing man deliver more vicious blows. The man on the floor had curled into itself and stopped struggling. The man might be unconscious, even dead.

She'd seen her share of random cruelty in her life. The bloody bones tattoo on her arm was proof she'd been on the receiving end. It was *wrong* to let this pass; she knew Lowbacca and Jao would have rushed in to break up the fight, Force or no Force.

But Deliah dragged her away. With a pink hand firm on her shoulder, Kyra allowed herself to be pulled toward the clean, bright section ahead. She could still hear the sounds of

muffled violence receding behind them; then she heard the tang of a single blaster shot, followed by silence.

Deliah withdrew her hand, and Kyra shuffled to the light in a daze. As they approached the bright place, where beings with decent clothes went around their business unaware, Deliah leaned close and said, "If you'd gone in there, that could have been you. You understand?"

"It wasn't right," Kyra muttered.

"It's life," Deliah said, like that was the end of the argument.

Kyra didn't have any words to continue it. She followed Deliah through another patch of bright halls, to the section of Cloud City that hosted the equipment market. Deliah shifted her attention to the pretty ship parts with apparent ease, but for Kyra it was harder to forget what had come before.

Jariah Syn had been in worse places than the one in which they met Chonyo, but it was still a dive. The light was low because half the lamps seemed burned out, the grime on the floor squished faintly beneath his boots, and the Togruta onstage was wriggling around with an impressive lack of enthusiasm. He, Cade, and Jao went straight to the bar and ordered drinks. Once they got libations in acceptably-clean glasses, Jariah scanned the dark cantina for his friend.

The Yuuzhan Vong was sitting in a corner booth with a dead overhead light, but ambient glow spilled across a masquered face with tanned skin and a dark beard. It was the same face he'd seen Chonyo wear the last time they'd met, but different from the one he'd used back on *Crimson Axe*. It must be handy, Jariah thought, to be able to change faces at will.

"Good to see you again, Chonyo," he said as he dropped into the booth first. Cade followed, then Jao.

"Good to see you too," Chonyo said. His yellow-tinted eyes turned to Jao. "I've never met you before. You the Imp?"

"That's right." Jao gave a polite little smile.

Chonyo told Jariah, "You keep strange company these days. Next time you should bring that Jedi Wook you've mentioned."

“You said not to attract attention.”

“Lad, half the patrons here are drunk stupid and the other half are passed out.” Chonyo shrugged. “But whatever. Enjoy the drinks. They’re actually half-decent.”

His guests did just that, but Jariah could see the confusion on Jao’s face. Chonyo had been born on Zonama Sekot but been away for nearly twenty years, and he was as far from the Yuuzhan Vong stereotype as you could get.

After taking a gulp of ale Jariah asked, “So what have you got for me? I don’t see any cargo here, so I’m guessing you’ve got it on your ship.”

“That’s right.” Chonyo reached into his brown jacket and withdrew a slim datapad. He slid it across the scuffed table and Jariah looked over the inventory list.

“All fresh merchandise,” the Yuuzhan Vong added. “Thuds bugs, blast bugs, razor bugs.... And eight amphistaffs, fresh from the grove.”

Jariah scanned the list hungrily. He had a love for exotic weapons and they didn’t get more exotic than Yuuzhan Vong stuff. “Do they need breaking in?”

“They do. But you’ve always been good at that.”

He certainly had; he’d been just a kid when Chonyo showed up on *Crimson Axe*, and the Yuuzhan Vong pirate had taken him under his wing after Jariah’s father had been killed by a Jedi. Chonyo had shipped off the *Axe* less than a year after Cade joined and seemed to be doing well as a smuggler, bounty hunter, and information dealer all rolled into one.

Jao frowned. “Where does one get illegal Yuuzhan Vong weapons when Zonama Sekot’s under strict quarantine?”

“You going to report me to your empress?”

“I was just curious. We’ve got bigger problems than you.”

The Yuuzhan Vong chuckled. “Let me put it this way, lad. My people hauled an entire interstellar *civilization* into this galaxy. Do you really think you’d be able to keep *all* of us cooped up on a single planet?”

“No,” Jao said. “I’ imagine your kind wouldn’t be very easy to... coop up.”

“And you’d be right. There’s more shapers running around the galaxy than Nei Rin.” He looked to Cade. “When’d you last talk to her, anyway?”

“Been at least four months,” Cade said. “She hasn’t had anything new for us and we haven’t had questions for her.”

“So she didn’t tell you that Khat Lah’s gathered himself some followers?”

Jariah, who’d been half-paying attention to their words, looked up from the datapad. “What kind of followers?”

“Yuuzhan Vong, what do you think? My source says he went back to Zonama Sekot and recruited about twenty of them, mostly warriors.”

“When was this?”

“About fifteen months ago, so before all your Sith virus stuff started happening.”

“What did he recruit them for?” asked Jao.

“I have no idea. All I’ve got is word from another Yuuzhan Vong that he saw Khat Lah and a bunch more of our kind on Sevarcos. They had a Sekotan ship, one of the living ones with dovin basal propulsion.”

That meant they could stop looking for an IC-2 scoutcraft. The organic vessels crafted on Zonama Sekot could be implanted with either standard technology or Yuuzhan Vong biotech to handle propulsions, weapons, and shields. They were an extreme rarity, the kind everybody stopped to look twice at but next to nobody would be able to identify. Most people thought they were of Geonosian or Colicoid design.

“Any idea what they were doing on Sevarcos?” Cade asked.

“They needed some repairs on their ship. Capable techs for Yuuzhan Vong ones are hard to come by.”

“What kind of repairs? Were they in a fight?”

Chonyo shook his head. “My source says a dovin basal was malfunctioning. Genetic defect, probably.”

“This source wasn’t from Jezal Ordon, was it?”

“No. I haven’t heard from him in a while. Anyway, my source told me all they knew, and they’re long gone from that corner of space.”

“You protect other Yuuzhan Vong, I respect that,” Jao said. “But did they give any indication of where Khat Lah was going, or where he’d come from?”

“Actually, yes. My source says he overheard some of Khat Lah’s crew talking about their last stop. Sounded like Sebiris, in the Kathol sector.”

Jariah was far-travelled, but he'd never been to the Kathol region. It was on the farthest edge of the Outer Rim, past even the Minos and Elrood sectors. The place was known mostly for its unexplained spatial anomalies like the Kathol Rift, which according to Cade was inhabited by a strange arcane sect of alien Force-users that existed beyond normal space-time.

All the more reason to stay away, Jariah figured. He'd more or less stopped hating every Jedi for his father's death, but that didn't mean he *liked* Force-users. Their powers outstripped the understanding of lowly mortals like himself, and worse, whenever they started fighting among themselves they usually dragged the rest of the galaxy into a bloodbath. Some weird tweak of genetics made them automatic lords and masters over everyone else, and while Jariah wasn't the political type, he knew what felt fair and what didn't. Now that they'd all lost the Force- however that worked, he still wasn't sure- maybe things would quiet down a little.

Yet for all that, here he was, helping Cade on some long-shot mission to get the Force back. He wasn't crazy about the mission; he'd much rather be wasting Rav's pillaged money on Zeltros. But Cade was his brother, and his brother needed help, so he'd committed himself to follow. For a while, anyway.

Cade asked, "So they were on Sebiris fifteen months ago?"

Chonyo shrugged. "Not a hot lead, but it's what I've got."

"It's the warmest we've had so far. We'll look into it."

"Glad to hear it." Chonyo finished his drink, then laid his hand on the tabletop and rubbed thumb and forefinger together. No matter what galaxy you were from, it was a request for payment.

"Relax, you'll get your money," Jariah said. "We'll throw it in with payment for the merchandise."

"You decided what you want yet?"

"Let's go back to your ship so I can take a look." Jariah pushed the datapad back to Chonyo and stood up. That was sign for Cade and Jao to rise too, and the latter hurriedly gulped down half his glass.

They walked out of the cantina, Chonyo in the lead, the others following. The stage was empty and, as Chonyo had

predicted, the patrons all seemed passed out or well on their way. According to C-3PO, Cloud City had once been a prized destination, but nothing lasted forever.

"Fifteen months," Jao said, half to himself as they walked.

"Best we've got," Cade said. "Not that that says a lot."

"I think it does. I think it says that wherever Khat Lah is now, he's been there for a year or more. It would explain why nobody's seen him travelling recently."

Khat Lah being dead or imprisoned someplace would also explain it, but Jariah didn't bring that up. He said, "Maybe we'll pick up a fresh lead on Sebiris. Stranger stuff's happened."

"We live in hope," Cade said wearily, but he was right.

Once they sealed this deal with Chonyo they could get moving again. This time they might even find something useful.

The Mid-Rim planet of Mrlsst collected some of the best universities in the galaxy, aggregating their grounds into a vast academic megalopolis packed with research centers, libraries, lecture halls and convocation arenas. Despite hosting millions of students and staff, the place never felt its size. The buildings were white and clean, the boulevards broad and lined with lush green tree-stalks ten meters high. The population drew from across the galaxy, with a predominance of young humans and native Mrllssi.

Eli Horn looked like he belonged, but he wasn't one of them. He had a mission and tried not to be distracted by all the bright faces and pretty young women living lives normal youths were expected to. After docking at the spaceport, Eli had set off on his own for this task; Darth Talon would draw too many stares. He made his way to the campus of Mrlsst's xenoanthroplogy institute, the most renowned of its type in the galaxy and, more importantly, the site of a vast research library.

The archives were open to offworlders and when he stepped into the library foyer, a squat feather-headed Mrllssi directed him to a computer console where he was required to register for a reading permit. He was glad to see it, and he proceeded to enter identification information. He was not in

truth a university student from Corulag named Orath Panelis, but like Khat Lah, he'd secured falsified identity cards before he and Talon began crisscrossing the galaxy.

As he finished submitting the information, Eli said casually, "I'm looking for information on the Pre-Republic era, with a focus on the Rakatan and Gree empires. I have a professor who did research here last year. Is there any way I can look up a list of the archives he viewed?"

The Mrlssi's feathers bristled. "Tsi, I am sorry. Reading lists from our patrons are confidential."

"But you do record them?"

"They are stores in our database, of course... But it is not in library permissions to share. Perhaps you could ask your professor, tsi?"

"He died in a speeder accident a few months ago," Eli said, very serious.

"I am so sorry," the Mrlssi flustered. "But the information is confidential. You understand?"

"I understand." He made a show of disappointment.

"I can provide you with a general reading guide, tsi? Your topic is not uncommon. We have a list of the most requested volumes."

"I'd like that, thank you."

The Mrlssi explained that a list would be sent to whatever cubicle Eli activated in the reading hall. Acting suitably polite, he thanked the librarian and made his way to the long, barrel-roofed chamber full of tightly-packed reading cubicles, each one with a built-in touchscreen datapad. As the librarian had explained, the vast majority of the archives were kept in chronic stasis fields and the public was only able to access digitally scanned images or holographic reproductions. Eli selected one cubicle far from the reference desks, where he'd be sure to have privacy, and inserted his reader's card into the datapad. Just as promised, a list of popular tomes regarding the Gree and Rakata downloaded onto his pad.

It would be good to reconcile hard scholarship with the jumble of legends he'd found in the Gree archives, but Eli had something else to do first.

The Jedi and Sith both had taught him to rely on the Force as his primary tool. Now the Force was gone, and he'd had to

teach himself new ones. Over the past months he'd been learning how to slice through common digital security protocols, and he doubted the library's reader database was protected by anything too rigorous. It took some experimentation, but after fifteen minutes he was able to access confidential visitor's information on the cubicle's built-in datapad. He scanned through a long list of visitors, hoping with held breath to see his father's name.

And there it was. Just as he'd hoped, Khat Lah had been here, about eighteen months back. Along with his registration information there was a long list of the documents so-called Reikar Horn had viewed and the order in which he'd pulled them.

Just from scanning the titles, Eli saw a pattern. Khat Lah had spent almost a week at this library, first pulling titles related to the Rakata and the Gree, many from the list he'd just been given. On his last two days, however, he'd exclusively pulled documents related to the Kathol sector, which Eli recalled was a region on the Outer Rim's edge, lightly populated and difficult to navigate for its bizarre spatial distortions.

He called up the documents and began skimming them. Some were shorter journal articles discussing theories on the sector's anomalies, but he encountered a series of field reports from an archaeological excavation on a planet called Sebiris. The reports themselves gave little context, but from what Eli could gather, the project had been proceeding on and off for over two decades, frequently interrupted by war or lack of funding. The most recent report was from after Darth Krayt's defeat and described the project as renewed and expanded.

He read more details on the project itself. It seemed that Sebiris was on the edge of a vast, starless expanse called the Marcol Void, which some theorized to be of artificial origin. Sebiris had a native population of saurians, which had been in a pre-industrial state when Palpatine's Empire had taken the world a hundred and fifty years ago. Since then many human settlers had come to the planet, and their coexistence with the native Sebiri seemed tense.

Of particular interest was a massive hexagonal domed structure located on the planet's northwest continent. The Sebiri treated the place with cautious reverence and had never dared break open the dome. Imperial archaeological teams had held no such qualms, but they'd been surprised to discover the dome was carved from a single piece of rock; stranger still, the hard stone seemed to have been removed from a shelf formation on the planet's southern hemisphere.

The galaxy was full of strange, ancient curiosities, but as Eli read on he understood what had caught Khat Lah's particular interest. In the years before the Sith-Imperial war, xenoarchaeologists had obtained equipment and funds to finally carve through part of the dome and see what was inside. Even through the report's dry academic text, Eli could sense the researchers' excitement as they reported their find. They believed they'd uncovered the ruins of an ancient hypergate.

These portals, which could transmit matter instantaneously across the galaxy without need for a spaceship or hyperdrive engine, had been mentioned frequently in the Gree archives. The cephalopod aliens had relied extensively on the devices to bind their interstellar empire together. Some of what Eli'd read had seemed to imply that the Gree had adopted the technology from another ancient race, the extinct Kwa. Other snippets had insisted the Kwa had stolen it from the Gree. Everything seemed to agree that the hypergates has been conquered and co-opted by Rakata seeking to expand their Infinite Empire. Most hypergates had been destroyed, but some were known to have survived in various states of disuse. Eli had read that a gate on Dathomir had been destroyed shortly before Palpatine's rise, and that others still existed in the Gree enclave, though none knew how to use them.

That coincided with the Gree archives themselves, which included an index of over two hundred worlds which had, at one time or another, hosted a hypergate. Dathomir was among them, as were Te Hasa, Asation, and the other planets in the surviving Enclave. The archives were unclear as to whether the gates listed were solely of Gree origin, but the translators hired by Darth Acheron had otherwise been

thorough, even generous. The list included not only the names of systems in ancient Gree and modern Basic, but short summaries of the star systems and coordinates using a Republic-era standard spatial grid. While Eli had heard of a few planets, many were unfamiliar, and some so obscure they weren't even listed on standard star charts.

One theory, supported by scraps in the Gree archives, was that the gates had been powered by Force energy. How such a thing worked, Eli had no idea, but he'd seen the same phrase used over and over to describe the energy fueling both the gates and the Rakatan war machines. The translation from Gree had called it the 'breath of the gods,' a phrase that, he recalled, Khat Lah had also used to describe the Force.

The hypergate on Sebiris had clearly aroused Khat Lah's interest. That had been over a year ago, before the Force had gone silent, but it was the best lead they'd uncovered since this search began, and they'd have to investigate it.

Rather than hurry to go tell this to Darth Talon, Eli took his time. He remained in the library for hours, reviewing the digitized archives. Modern scholars confirmed much of what he'd gathered from the Gree translations. The Rakata had been a race of powerful Force-users who'd eventually lost their ability to touch it. The hypergates had been intentionally wrecked by their Kwa and Gree creations in an attempt to stop the Rakata's spread. While ruins had been found, no record existed of a working hypergate, and attempts at understanding them were mostly theoretical.

He still didn't know why the hypergate had elicited Khat Lah's interest, but a visit to Sebiris might reveal something. Before leaving he looked up the latest reports from the excavation team and found two filed within the past year.

What he read in those entries confused him. They spoke of a slowdown in research, staff problems, and equipment losses, but only in the vaguest terms. Given the dry academic precision of the others reports it was very strange, and he pulled up each one the excavation team had filed to try to piece together what had happened.

He found no explanation. Something had happened that the official reports were hedging around, and it had happened after Khat Lah paid his visit to Mrlsst. Whatever the

Yuuzhan Vong had done since then, it must have upset the excavation on Sebiris in a way they didn't want to admit publicly.

That was all the more reason to make haste for the Kathol sector. Eli reviewed the reports one more time to make sure he'd missed nothing, then withdrew his reader card from the datapad and gathered his things.

When he stepped outside he was surprised to find it was twilight. The academy city's students and professors had departed their study halls, leaving the quadrangles empty but the boulevards bustling with young people eager for a fun evening. As he made his back to the spaceport Eli wasn't distracted by the bright lights or pretty faces, the life a normal man his age should be living.

He had a place to go, and a mission to accomplish.

Chapter Nine

Bavinyar was an unlikely place for the empress to make her first trip from Coruscant in months. Located in the Mid Rim far from major trade routes, it was sparsely populated by a mix of Cerean and human settlers who occupied the volcanic islands that dotted an otherwise watery surface. When he'd been asked to accompany Marasiah on her visit there, Ganner Krieg had known nothing of the planet, and he'd taken the time en route to brush himself up on its history, its government, and how likely- or unlikely- it was the bow to the empress' demands.

What he wasn't prepared for was how scenic the planet was. The oceans were stunningly blue. Each island was a verdant mountain rimmed by white-sand beaches. His first whiff of local air was pleasantly warm and slightly tanged with salty ocean breeze. It was, he thought, a planet the Mon Cals and Quarren might find haven on, if the current inhabitants obliged.

Bavinyar's capital and largest city was located on an island called Cephalia, and its primary spaceport was located on a smaller, separate island directly south called Maressa. The empress' scarlet shuttle set down in Maressa's most secure berth, and the delegation was met with a display of splendor from a mix of Cerean and human guards in brown and gold uniforms. They were then put onto a private airspeeder that carried them from Maressa over a channel two kilometers wide to Cephalia.

The Federation's delegation to Bavinyar included the empress herself and her aide Astraal Vao, plus four of her

most veteran Imperial Knights. Aside from Ganner and Antares Draco, Azlyn Rae was in attendance, as was Sekh-Mad-Har, the Knights' sole Cerean. All six of them crammed into the white airspeeder's cabin and pressed against the window Ganner had a good view as they lifted off. As they drifted over the channel he saw a narrow, elevated umbilical connecting to the two islands, and he marked the moving glint as a mag-lev car ferrying passengers between spaceport and city.

This airspeeder ride, he understood, was part of the VIP treatment. The Bavinyari liked to keep Cephalia's airspace clear and clean, and he understood why as they banked low over the city. Draped across the ridges and peaks of the volcanic isle, it was a rare architectural hodgepodge that worked. White stone buildings, elegantly carved and domed, mixed with high glassy towers that reflected bright sunlight. The streets were a mix of narrow lanes and curving boulevards lined with green palms.

It seemed a very pleasant world, comfortably aloof from the greater drama of galactic affairs. Ganner doubted its government would concede easily to Marasiah's request. But then, that was why she'd come here in person.

As their airspeeder banked toward the government district halfway up the main mountain, Ganner leaned over to Antares and whispered, "The empress picks excellent vacation spots."

His friend's face relaxed from its usual frown. "She truly does."

"We're set for three days here. Hopefully you two have scheduled some free time."

"We have. I think she'll need it. The Bavinyari are sure to put up a fuss."

"Then she'll just have to throw her weight around." And, Ganner thought, maybe a bit of the Force, just to make sure they were convinced.

"She'll appeal to their better natures," Antares said. "And their public image."

"You've learned a little politics." The man Ganner had trained with had always put niceties behind pursuit of the right cause as he'd seen it.

"I guess I have." To Ganner's surprise, his friend smiled. It was a weak, tired smile, but there it was.

He was glad to see it. Even before losing the Force, Antares had been wracked by guilt for his failing the emperor. If he was moving past his hurt in any small way, Ganner was grateful for the example to follow.

After the speeder set down on the landing pad, the four Imperial Knights disembarked first, followed by Marasiah and Astraal. A strong warm gust blew across the platform, stirring their ceremonial capes. Marasiah stepped ahead to speak with the assembled Bavinyari dignitaries. A few gave respectful bows, but Marasiah surprised them- and Ganner- by offering her hand to shake.

Ganner let his eyes slip to Antares, who very slightly mouthed the word: "Politics."

It wasn't politics as Marasiah's father would have done it, but then, neither was the new senate back on Coruscant. Ganner chose take it as a hopeful sign as he followed the empress inside.

When Darth Havok finally arrived on Coruscant, he found everything had been prepared by the other Sith agents currently in the capital. He was provided with false identity documents, a personal bank account, even a modest furnished apartment in the Calocour Heights district. From here he could coordinate Sith activities on Coruscant and consult with Darth Nihl in the Outer Rim, both with equal ease.

What caught Havok's interest more than anything as he settled in was the news reports. Here on Coruscant you had access to just about every network in the Federation, and it was most enlightening to see what was getting the most airtime. The vote for speaker of the senate was just days away, and commentators reveled in endless speculation and arguments as to which of the four candidates would come out on top. Most agreed that the two so-called 'moderate' or 'pragmatic' candidates would split a centrist vote between them, leaving the real match-up between Bastion's Senator Eldon and Rhinnal's Senator Brighton- in short, between the stalwart Imperials and die-hard Alliance supporters. It all

seemed to Havok a farce; he'd never been naïve enough to think that democracy was a sane way to run a galactic government and found himself disappointed the empress had weakened herself by allowing the senate at all. Her father, despite his many shortcomings, wouldn't have tolerated the chipping-away of his power.

As he watched the commentators babble on, Havok wondered what Elliah would have thought. She'd always been less authoritative than Roan, perhaps because the Hapan aristocracy she'd grown up in had been so corrupt and ineffectual. Perhaps Maraisah thought she was invoking her mother's wisdom with these democratic reforms. Havok couldn't be sure. Thinking on the old empress and how he'd killed her had once brought a swell of dark pride; now it made him uncomfortable.

The continued campaigns in the Outer Rim got far less airplay than Coruscant's elections. Even though it was the biggest fighting the galaxy had seen since Krayt's downfall, it still seemed impossibly distant to the denizens of the Core. In a way they were right; though Darth Nihl hadn't revealed his entire scheme to Havok, it was clear that the Nagai didn't have the resources to hold more than a few sectors. Likely, Nihl would carve out a secure enclave and hold it. Havok couldn't decide if creating a miniature replica of Krayt's Sith-led empire was an admirable goal or a pathetic one, but he didn't doubt Nihl could accomplish it. With the Force or without, the Dark Lord was formidable in his determination.

Both those topics were pushed aside by the news-nets when the empress paid visit to Bavinyar. Here was what Havok had really wanted to watch, and he spent hours at a time in his anonymous apartment, watching the broadcasts and awaiting the fruits of his efforts.

His communication with Pleshchai had been limited since leaving Vorzyd V. The Black Sun vigo had assured him that an assassination scheme was in place. The deed would be public, and the threat to Marasiah's life would be very real. He'd also assured that investigators would find credible evidence linking the assault to Senator Porat Derrol of Champala, a Brighton-supporting Alliance stalwart and

former soldier in Gar Stazi's fleet. In short, everything was perfectly set up to rip the Federation apart at its seams.

Pleshchai had refrained from specifics, which meant Havok was literally on the edge of his seat during the broadcasts as he waited for the assassin to strike. He watched as the empress was carried via airspeeder from the spaceport to the main island of Cephalia, and he leaned close as aerial cameras captured her greet a delegation from the Bavinyari government.

The empress was dressed in stunning white, with a thin gold crown around her head. When he'd last seen Marasiah in person she'd been his prisoner in the Sith temple on Korriban. Despite his attempts to break her she'd been resilient; he'd pushed her to the edge but she'd drawn back from despair. Elliah's daughter had her mother's strong will.

Hanging behind Marasiah were her Imperial Knights in their scarlet splendor. The sight of that armor, which Eshkar Niin had once worn, usually filled Havok with derision, but his attention was drawn to the stolid face of Antares Draco. Niin's apprentice had also spent time as Havok's captive, and unlike his lover, Antares had broken to reveal the location of the hidden Jedi Temple at Taivas. He'd hoped during Antares' breaking that he might turn the young man to the dark side, as he'd always had a deep and righteous anger within him. Instead Antares had proven a disappointment, a weakling. He was amazed that Marasiah had agreed to take him as her consort.

Leaning close to the image, squinting at the details of Antares' face, he wondered what the man was thinking now. He wondered how his old apprentice had dealt with the sudden silence in the Force, whether it had broken him inside. He wondered whether Antares was now trudging through a life that was hollow and without purpose. It was a grim fate, he thought, but fitting for a man who'd continually disappointed.

Marasiah and her party followed the Bavinyari delegation inside, away from the holo-cams' view. Pleshchai had been insistent that the assassination attempt, when it came, would be very public, so Havok busied himself with other work while he waited. Five hours later, after some private talks

with the local government, Marasiah appeared again, once more with her scarlet bodyguards. They stood with a group of Bavinyari on the steps of some white-stone government building, apparently before a modest crowd. It was the perfect setting for an assassination and Havok watched in anticipation as Bavinyar's prime minister spoke, then Marasiah.

"I'm proud to have worked with the Bavinyari government so far," she said, looking more regal and inspiring than her father ever had. "They have been accommodating to our requests and willing to help millions of refugees from Dac. They have agreed to help resettle parts of the Mon Cal and Quarren populations in Bavinyar's southern oceans. Over the next few days I'll be working closely with the Bavinyari to lay down a preliminary framework for mass population transfers. Rest assured we will work with the local government at every turn and do our best to make sure the Mon Calamari and Quarren are integrated into their new homes- politically, socially, and economically."

Havok was surprised she'd made so much progress so quickly. Perhaps she'd used the Force to nudge the Bavinyari where she wanted them to go. After Marasiah talked another Bavinyari official gave a speech reassuring the locals that the millions of refugees wouldn't upset their normal lives.

It was a momentous announcement wrapped in typical democratic platitudes. Havok wavered between boredom and impatience. When Marasiah and the others stepped back inside the building, he was downright angry. Rage without the dark side became distracting and he tampered it as best he could. The speech had *looked* like the perfect venue for an assassination, but Black Sun's agent knew the security on the ground better than he did. The time would come eventually; he had to be patient.

For the next two days Havok was effectively trapped by the news broadcasts. Boredom, impatience, and anger all brewed together as Marasiah's short, sporadic public appearances passed without incident. There was even word that she and her party had retreated to a private island for a half-day of recreation. Havok was appalled. He wanted to call Vigo Pleshchai, interrogate and threaten him and find

out what the delay was. Without the attempt on Marasiah's life, Nihl's conquests in the Outer Rim would also be threatened.

When the news reported that talks had concluded and the empress was leaving Cephalia, Havok was almost bursting with rage. Before calling to berate Pleshchai he forced himself to sit and scour the news-nets for the last footage of Marasiah on Bavinyar. A few networks had already moved into commentary mode- one had Senator Gahan listing complaints about the government's lack of transparency- but the rest followed Marasiah and company as they boarded their white airspeeder, lifted off from Cephalia's government zone, and veered toward the channel and Maressa's spaceport.

Havok picked one channel, watched, and waited. A Sith Lord should have never been this helpless, but watching was all he could do.

Late afternoon sunlight slanted over Cephalia, casting long shadows from the skyscrapers and turning the surrounding ocean white-gold. As their airspeeder cut across the channel between Cephalia and Maressa they ran parallel to the umbilical maglev train connecting capital and spaceport. It was a straight black line through gleam so bright Marasiah had to look away.

Her party of six sat two-by-two in the passenger compartment, with Marasiah and Astraal in front, Antares and Ganner in the back. Astraal was summarizing reports from her datapad, catching Marasiah up on the latest from the Outer Rim. General Jaeger and Admiral Slossar had staged their fleets and were ready for the Nagai's next move, she said, and recited a list of possible targets.

Astraal was only trying to be helpful, but Marasiah's attention drifted. The mission to Bavinyar had gone better than she'd hoped, with the government apparently ready to bow before public pressure to help settle Dac's refugees. They'd drawn some lines, namely restricting the total number of beings they'd take into their oceans, which meant several more worlds would be required to help. Marasiah hoped, with Bavinyar's example, they'd do just that. If not,

she could always use this world to shame others into compliance.

That line of thought tired her, and her thoughts drifted further. Yesterday she'd delivered Antares the brief vacation she'd promised. They'd gotten a tiny island entirely to themselves and for once could enjoy themselves, free of the stress of politics and reminders of all they'd lost. She'd seen Antares' habitual moodiness slide off like a cloak and for one day they'd enjoyed each other as they once had, when she'd been merely a princess and he merely a Knight. She hoped she could recapture some of that magic on Coruscant and knew it wouldn't be easy.

As the speeder drew close to Maressa, the warm feeling inside her suddenly chilled. Marasiah looked around the cabin; the Knights behind her were undisturbed but Astraal had stopped her report.

"Majesty?" she asked. "Is there a problem?"

Something was wrong, but Marasiah had no idea what. The cold feeling inside her wasn't going away and she realized with a stab of dread that the Force itself was talking to her, warning her for a threat she couldn't see.

"Driver," she called, "How much longer to set-down?"

The reply came back promptly. "We're about one minute and thirty seconds out. Is something wrong, Majesty?"

Something was wrong, very wrong, but she had no idea what. The other Knights had noticed her distress and looked around, helpless and confused.

Then the airspeeder jerked violently. Slanting sunlight flashed in Marasiah's eyes and inertia slammed her into the bulkhead, cracking her head against the window. Blinded and dazed, she could still feel the speeder spiral out-of-control from the sky. An acrid scent assaulted her but she couldn't see any smoke.

Vision cleared long enough to see the sun-dappled channel coming on them fast. Marasiah reached out with the Force and strained to stop their crash. Her senses were addled and her heart raced in fear and it was so *hard* to call on the Force, and even in panic she realized how shameful it would be for one of the galaxy's last living Force-users to fail right when she needed her power the most.

For a second she connected, and through the Force touched the others in the car with her. She felt her longtime friend Astraal and Antares, who meant more to her than anyone. She felt Ganner Krieg and Azlyn Rae and Sekh-Mad-Har, loyal Knights she'd trusted for many years.

Marasiah couldn't let them down. Not for panic, not for shame.

She touched the Force, held on tight, and used its power to push against the speeder's violent plunge. She couldn't stop its falling but she could slow it, straighten it, so it might belly-slam into the channel. If she did that, they just might stay alive until rescue crews came-

Water hit them, so hard. She felt the speeder's underside slam into waves. Inertia smacked her head against the window. Sunlight flared gold like an exploding star, and then she knew only black.

When the airspeeder collided with the channel its underside slammed into water first. For a moment Ganner, strapped tight to the back bench beside Antares, thought they might even keep from sinking. Then the speeder imbalanced and tilted violently to one side. He saw the empress's head hit the window and, worse, saw the panel behind her implode. Ocean water and shattered glass burst into the cabin, and Sekh-Mad-Har gave a panicked cry as shards cut into his tall head and drew blood.

"We have to get out of here!" Antares called as he unbuckled the restraint round his chest. "Get out now!"

Azlyn acted next. None of them had used their lightsabers at all on this mission, but she ignited her white blade and carved out the glass beside her. As the airspeeder tilted toward its right side, the left bank of windows were still exposed to open air, and Ganner cut open his window as well.

"Armor off!" he called. "It'll just weigh us down!"

There was neither time nor space to properly remove their ceremonial plating, but they tried. As water continued to rush in Ganner popped off his chestplate and shoulder-pads. Antares helped him remove his cape. Azlyn took off what she could but she needed the respirator built into her chestpiece to survive, assuming it functioned at all.

“Can that work in water?” Ganner called to her.

Azlyn’s response was a half-second stare. Then she jumped out of the speeder, into the channel. Sekh-Mad-Har, scalp bleeding from a dozen places, leaned over the back of Marasiah’s seat and gathered the unconscious empress in both arms. As the Cerean followed Azlyn out the window, Antares was right behind him asking, “Is Sia hurt? How bad is it?”

“She’s breathing, for now,” Sekh-Mad-Har grunted.

Cradling the empress in both arms he pushed away from the sinking speeder and kicked with both legs to stay afloat. Antares followed him outside, where Azlyn, Ganner, and Astraal were already treading water.

“Where’s the driver?” asked Ganner. “Did he make it out?”

The others looked to the speeder hull as it quickly sank below the waves. Astraal said, “The windshield exploded on impact. I don’t think he made it.”

Kicking to stay afloat, Ganner did a complete spin to take in their surroundings. They were too far from Maressa to try swimming, further still from Cephalia. The maglev bridge was closest but spanned high above, and the support pylons stabbing into the water didn’t have anything to grab on to.

“Just hold on!” called Sekh-Mad-Har. Taller and stronger than a human, the Cerean was the only one who could have held Marasiah out of the water and kept himself afloat. “They must have seen us go down! They’ll send help in a-”

His tall head burst apart. Time seemed to slow down and Ganner watched scorched flesh and skull fragments geyser into the air, each fleck visible against golden sunlight. Then Sekh-Mad-Har’s body went limp and started to sink.

“Sia!” Antares screamed. He kicked through the water and grabbed her from the other Knight’s arms as Sekh-Mad-Har slipped beneath the waves. Antares struggled to keep the weight of his body and hers afloat and Ganner paddled to help, but Azlyn called, “Wait! Ganner wait!”

Hot spray burst from the water right in front of his face. Ganner stopped swimming and watched another geyser explode, further from him and closer to the empress.

Realization struck him but Azlyn said it first. “Sniper! Draco, get down!”

Antares was still struggling to hold Marasiah's limp body in his arms; he wasn't paying attention to what they were saying. Gathering her, he lifted her face from the water and held her close. Ganner started kicking toward him again and called out his name.

Time slowed down again. Too close but too far, Ganner watched the next blaster-shot come in from over Antares' shoulder, disappear, then burst out of his chest, right above the heart. His face went slack and his arms limp; Marasiah tumbled back into the water.

Instinct kicked in and Ganner grabbed the empress first. He kicked furiously to stay afloat while Azlyn tried to hold Antares from behind. Astraal Vao kicked forward, grabbed Marasiah's legs, and lifted them out of the water, as though they could make her float.

None of it would matter. They were all kicking hard and almost out of breath. Neither he nor Azlyn had the Force to draw on. Remembering the direction of the blast had taken Antares, Ganner looked to the west and saw the maglev bridge as a black streak against gold sky. The sniper was on it somewhere and there was no way they could hide.

Then he heard the roar of nearby airspeeder engines. Spray washed in his face and down-facing repulsors brushed the water. Another speeder swooped from the east and an inflating raft dropped from its belly.

Ganner had no breath to shout, but he waved an arm in the direction of the bridge, trying to warn them of the sniper. Rescue crews dropped from the speeder and swam toward them, dragging the raft. They went to Azlyn first, taking Antares, then moved Marasiah onto the raft. Finally they pulled Astraal, Azlyn, and Ganner out of the water.

His arms and legs ached for the strain and his oxygen-starved brain grasped for sense. Collapsed on his back and staring at the sky, Ganner tried to figure out why they were still alive. Maybe the sniper had seen the rescue speeder and fled. He couldn't think of any other reason.

When he found the strength he sat upright on the raft. Astraal was too weak to rise but Azlyn had crawled over to Marasiah, who was also attended by a pair of white-uniformed medics.

“Is she all right?” Ganner called. “Tell me she’s all right!”

“The empress is unconscious but breathing,” said one medic.

Relief lasted until he saw Antares lying on the other side of the raft. Another medic was bent over him, face grim.

“What about Antares?” asked Ganner, voice faltering. “Is he-”

The medic picked up her head and shook it. “The blaster shot took him through the heart. I’m sorry, sir.”

All strength left him. Ganner collapsed on the raft and stared up at that beautiful Bavinyar sky, wishing this was all a dream and knowing that it wasn’t, knowing that he’d remember the exact gold tint of this day’s dying light as long as he lived.

Chapter Ten

The longer negotiations on Bakura wore on, the more Shado was impressed by Geral Storr's aplomb. He and the Imperial ambassador sat through over a dozen long discussions, half of which were pronounced in the fluting Ssi-ruuvi language and simultaneously translated through their earpieces, which gradually began to give Shado a headache. The talks went around in circles, with the Ssi-ruuvi delegate Ovipekkiis clamming up whenever anyone tried to pry about the situation on his homeworld. Despite some nudging, Shado still hadn't gotten confirmation that the Ssi-ruuk had lost their entechment abilities. Even when he tried questioning Vlothaw in private, the P'w'eck delegate obfuscated.

Still, progress was being made. In a conversation where Ovipekkiis was- by Storr's careful scheduling- absent, Vlothaw conceded that if his people did migrate en masse back to Lwhekk, they'd consider leaving some of their technology behind so the Bakuran repulsorlift industry wouldn't suffer. In exchange he'd asked to take some Bakuran materials with them, which General Koregion had flatly denied. Storr insisted that they could find a way around the impasse by trading information only, rather than material resources, to which Koregion had relented.

It was a good thing, Shado supposed, but he still felt useless.

The situation changed abruptly overnight. Shado awoke to the buzz of his comlink and new sunlight glowing against his bedroom curtains. He sat upright, fumbled on the comm, and said, "Jedi Vao here."

“Get outside and get dressed,” Storr snapped. He sounded actually angry, a first from the unflappable diplomat.

Shado threw back his sheets. “What’s wrong?”

“The Ssi-ruuk are *gone*.”

“Gone? Gone where?”

“Lwhekk, I’d think. They didn’t explain.”

“Then how-”

“Get dressed, Master Jedi, and meet me in the president’s office right away.”

Shado hurriedly put on his tunic and rushed into the hall. A security officer met him on the way to the upper level of the executive pyramid and escorted him to Recado’s office. The old man seemed shrunk behind his desk, surrounded by Storr, Koregion, and even Vlothaw, all on their feet.

“What’s happened?” asked Shado. “How could the Ssi-ruuk just leave?”

“They took off shortly after midnight,” Koregion said. The bald-headed general had his arms crossed and face twisted to a scowl. “Our ships in orbit warned them to return to ground but they kept going. It was either let them go open fire and start a war.”

“But why would they leave? Did something happen at negotiations yesterday?”

He looked around the group. Eyes went to Vlothaw, and the P’w’eck tilted his snout up and released a series of whistling noises. No sound chimed in Shado’s ear, and he silently cursed himself for not putting in his translator.

Storr politely explained, “The Ssi-ruuk did not depart alone. They took over fifty P’w’eck volunteers with them.”

“Back to Lwhekk?”

Vlothaw whistled and bobbed his head, which Shado took as affirmative.

“You let them leave?”

Vlothaw spoke again, and Storr translated, “Those P’w’eck did not ask permission before leaving. They simply left. These were some of the most ardent supporters of reunification.”

“So they go and leave the rest of the P’w’eck behind? That doesn’t sound like unification to me.”

Vlothaw fluted again, rather emphatically.

Storr said, "The delegate is trying to ascertain the truth. He was taken completely by surprise and insists their actions do not represent the P'w'eck as a whole... Even though some were elected to the P'w'eck legislature."

That was hardly a comfort. Shado asked the ambassador, "Have you informed Coruscant?"

"Not yet. I was hoping to get a better idea of what to tell them." Anger leaked into Storr's voice again. "If you'd join me, Master Jedi, I think we have a call to place."

Shado nodded. Before following Storr out of the office he looked at Recado, slumped in his desk. Perhaps he was pondering what price the Balance demanded he pay for whatever deal the Ssi-ruuk and those rogue P'w'eck had struck. Whatever his thoughts were, he wasn't sharing them with anyone, especially not the Jedi.

Located at the confluence of the Corellian Trade Spine and the Hydian Way, Terminus was often cited as the last port of civilization before reaching the wild edge of the Outer Rim. That edge was itself home to thousands of systems and billions of beings, including the Nagai.

Fifteen years ago, Relik K'sharn had set his sights on Terminus and launched an all-out attack to capture the populated, industrialized, strategically useful planet. He'd fancied it would be his crowning achievement as a warlord. Instead it had been a disaster; combined Imperial and Alliance fleets had smashed his to bits, ending both the Nagai conquests and, in many ways, the life of K'sharn himself.

As Darth Nihl, he stood on the bridge of his *Krish'nakt* and set eyes on the planet for the first time since that disaster. Its green sphere was marked by dozens of visible gray clusters marking sprawled urbanization, and with his naked eye he could even pick up the glint of spacecraft and defense stations in the planet's orbit.

Despite the battle here fifteen years ago, and despite the rash of Nagai attacks in nearby sector, the denizens of Terminus had tried to carry on their lives as usual. That was hardly surprising; most beings fell into stubborn denial at the thought their lives could be upended. Nihl hoped that the

admirals on Coruscant were smarter; otherwise this carefully staged return to Terminus would be anticlimactic.

Everything was going to plan so far. The Nagai fleet had split into five battle groups and decanted from hyperspace at different angles. Their fast ships were breaking formation and spreading wide to encircle the planet. Their craft weren't designed for prolonged sieges, but their sudden appearance and surrounding of the planet seemed to have stunned Terminus into submission. Nihl's ships quickly surrounded and destroyed the handful of local defense vessels, then moved on to picking off the weapons stations in orbit. Within thirty minutes Terminus had been rendered supine, and no ships were launching from the surface.

"Do we have any communication from the planet yet?" asked Nihl.

"Nothing, warlord," came the reply from the comm station. "Should we hail them?"

"Negative. Keep the jamming field at low intensity. Let them call for help."

Terminus may have been populated by fools, but they still must have been paying attention to Nihl's recent conquests. They'd picked up the pattern of each attack, where the Nagai raced in, quickly subdued the meager local defenses, then commanded the planet's government to surrender or face harsh consequences. The last worlds Nihl had taken had surrendered without a shot landing on their surface.

Terminus wasn't offering surrender, but Nihl hadn't requested it yet. He was waiting for it to make its call to whatever Federation fleets were waiting, and he was sure they were someplace. His spies in the Core had reported fleet movements out of Fondor and Rendili, and he had no doubt they'd be stationed nearby, waiting for the moment to act.

After nearly an hour *Krish'nakt's* crew began to grow impatient, and so had Nihl. The Nagai told the comm station, "Open a hail to the planetary government. Give them the standard surrender message."

"Yes, warlord."

As the officer got to work, Nihl took a look at the tactical display. With all of Terminus' defensive stations destroyed, the Nagai fleet had rearranged itself to form a loose corona

around the planet. They had situated themselves fairly deep within its gravity well, effectively trapping themselves close to the world, but also ensuring some warning when Federation ships dropped out of hyperspace at the well's edge.

Of course, the Nagai were just one piece of the strategy Nihl had laid out for this second battle at Terminus.

After a few minutes, Nihl asked, "No response?"

"Nothing, warlord."

"Then we should open fire." Nihl stalked over to the tactical station, where Darth Vurik's black-cloaked form loomed. "Don't aim for the government district. Aim for the spaceport. Scatter barrages on their shield barrier and around it. Put fear into them."

As the crew hurried to comply, Vurik asked Nihl in a low voice, "Are you sure our allies will come when we call?"

"I'm certain of it. They're being well compensated for their efforts."

"I'm not worried about the Mandalorians. The other ones--"

"Are receiving far more than credits can buy. Have faith, Lord Vurik."

The Sakiyan nodded stolidly. *Krish'nakt* reduced altitude and began to fire directly on the planet. Some laserfire scorched the energy shield erected over the spaceport while more roused fiery destruction beyond the dome's edge. Nihl let it go on for good five minutes before commanding the gunners to halt.

"Still no surrender?" he asked the comm station.

"Negative."

"Weapons, wait two minutes, then begin again. We'll keep up the pattern until--"

"Ah," said Vurik. "It's starting."

Nihl looked at the tactical holo. Sure enough, star destroyers were emerging from hyperspace at the edge of Terminus' gravity well. He counted three battle groups of three destroyers each, plus support craft. As they veered down on Terminus the destroyers split formation and began to vector for clusters of Nagai ships. Apparently the Imperials were confident they could handle the smaller, faster craft.

“Excellent,” Nihl stepped eagerly to the comm. “Hail Yaga Auchs. Tell him it’s time to join the fight.”

The jump from their staging area in deep space to the edge of Terminus’ orbit took the Mandalorian fleet all of two minutes. It was just enough time for them to patch the battlefield telemetry from Darth Nihl’s flagship into their tactical computers and survey the firefight they’d be jumping into.

When they exploded into realspace they were instantly thrown into a dazzling light-show. The incoming warships- mostly wedge-shaped *Pellaeon*-class star destroyers and smaller *Ardent*-class frigates- had their bright-glowing afts turned toward the incoming Mandos, but they had their rear shields ready and threw up protective screens over their engines. At the same time, smaller Imperial corvettes and attack frigates pivoted away from the bigger ships and raced out to meet the newcomers.

The Imps hardly acted like they’d been caught with their pants down, and that worried Yaga Auchs. His flagship frigate dove right into the fray with the rest of the Mando fleet, though it bore no markings to outwardly distinguish itself from two dozen other *Teroch III*-class assault ships. Mando frigates were small, fast, and tough, and Yaga was less worried about himself than the hundreds of pilots currently racing forward in their nimble T-shaped Beskads. His daughter was among them, leading an entire wing of starfighters.

He pushed worry about Sora aside; she was an adult now and a blooded warrior. She could take care of herself. He needed to focus on giving the Sith exactly what they’d demanded.

The data feed from his frigate’s sensors had been patched directly in his helmet, and as he looked out the viewport his visor’s head’s-up-display tainted the Imperial ships red, and Nagai ones green. As Nihl has promised, the Nagai had dipped their ships into low orbit, giving the Imps plenty of space to charge. Even though the Mandos were falling behind them they were barely slowing their approach on the Nagai fleet. It seemed like they were planning to trap the

fast-moving raiders close to the planet, pound them to pieces, and *then* pivot to fight the Mandos nipping at their tails.

Yaga intended to do more than nip. He barked out commands, splitting his ships seven different divisions, each one harassing a star destroyer. Though the Nagai ships were more numerous and the Imperials' more powerful, the Mandalorians' excelled at striking hard and fast, then withdrawing, and only the Mandos had free range of movement. As they made a run on the nearest star destroyer his flagship's inertial compensators strained as its pilots tried to maneuver the frigate like a snubfighter. Yaga gripped the observation deck railing to keep from falling.

They failed to punch a hole in the larger ship's shields, but Yaga was unconcerned. He watched through the viewport as an Imperial *Ardent*-class maneuvered to block their path, exposing its starboard flank and unleashing with broadside cannons. What Yaga's frigate couldn't evade it absorbed, and the shield scatter lit up the viewport so brightly he had to look away. He watched the tactical holo instead as two Mando corvettes, plus three full squads of Beskads, dove down on the Imperial ship's port side and overwhelmed its shields with a single bombing run. The frigate's starboard defenses stuttered and died as well but Yaga's ship kept charging and unleashed all of its missile and turbolaser batteries at once. The explosions that followed was once again blinding, but this time it tore through the Imperials' hull and wrenched billowing flame out of its scorched armor plating.

Some Mandos on the bridge cheered, others pumped fists. All did it silently within their helmets. Yaga, patched in to transmit on all freqs, told them, "Let the corvette pick apart the frigate. Have the Beskads follow on us. We'll go hunting for more Imps."

As his frigate peeling away Yaga watched a frenzied battle-scene pan by: star destroyers with aft shields lit bright, swarms of dogfighting snubs, the Nagai ships pushing violently away from Terminus, as though they intended to break through the Imperial blockage. With the Mandos' help they just might do it, though as Yaga saw it they didn't have a hope of taking Terminus now. It seemed to him folly to

have even tried, and he wished Nihl had never strongarmed him into this pointless fight. He glanced at the tactical holo and marked Sora's fighter wing weaving between two star destroyers, largely undamaged. That brought some relief.

Lightness in his gut turned to lead in a second. His eyes were still on the tactical holo as a second wave of red shapes appeared. They emerged from hyperspace as three distinct battle groups on different sides of the planet. Some plunged eagerly to join the fight while a few ships lingered far outside of Terminus' gravity well.

Yaga snarled inside his helmet; he knew what those ships were before the tactical sensors figured it out. He felt the deck shudder beneath him as the ship's artificial gravity adjusted to the new pull coming from outside Terminus' orbit. The tactical holo resolved new detail, marking those ships hanging outside the battle as MC135i Mon Calamari interdicator cruisers.

The Alliance had brought its share to the fight, and it had come to finish. With those artificial gravity wells online, no ship anywhere near Terminus was going to lightspeed. It would take over twenty minutes of running at full sublight to reach the edge of those wells, and the Alliance ships were spreading wide to prevent any such escapes.

Darth Nihl had warned Yaga not to interrupt him unless it was an absolute emergency; in his view, this certainly qualified. He routed a communication with Nihl's flagship directly through his helmet, and in the privacy of his brown-and-green *buy'c* he snarled, "This is the *Mand'alor*. I need to speak to the warlord. *Now*."

He got no reply, not even one telling him to wait. His hands tightened on the desk railing as he watched the first explosions of the Alliance ships joining the brawl. If his Mandos could punch through the Imps, meet up with the Nagai, and form a few collective battle groups, they just might have a chance.

Nihl's voice came on, sooner than expected. "Are you surprised by the new development, Mandalore?"

The *shabla* Sith sounded disturbingly calm. "You're not? They're coming down hard on us. We're about to get squeezed between their lines. I recommend we form breakout

parties and try to push free, maybe take down a drag ship on the way out.”

“Hold the line, Mandalore. That is an order.”

He bit back a dozen *Mando’a* curses. “They’re going to grind us to atoms. We need to get as far from Terminus as we can before they crush us.”

“Calm down and do as I command.” Somehow, through the scratchy audio link he could tell the Sith was smiling. “We have them exactly where we want them.”

“We’ve got them right where we want them now,” observed Admiral Yage as he looked at the tactical display. The huge hologram lit up half the situation room located inside the defense headquarters as observation satellites on the edge of the Terminus system tight-beamed every blow of the fight back to Coruscant.

Nonetheless, Gar Stazi felt aggravatingly far from where he needed to be. The empress was away on Bavinyar but most of the Federation’s other senior officials had been crammed into the observation room, including intelligence director Hogrum Chalk, Imperial admirals Yage and Fenel, and the Alliance’s Jhoram Bey. Stazi and Bey stayed close, crowded in as they were by so many humans, but everyone’s attention was fixed steadily on the relayed reports from Terminus.

Stazi himself had commanded there fifteen years ago, when they’d turned back Relik K’sharn and apparently killed him. Chalk reported that they still couldn’t confirm who was leading this renascent Nagai, but they all hoped to stop it at Terminus again. The battle was going well thus far; General Jaeger’s fleet had successfully trapped the Nagai inside the planet’s gravity well, triggering the enemy to call their reinforcements.

The appearance of the Mandalorians was not unexpected; Chalk’s intelligence sources had picked up reports of large-scale movements from the Mandalorian sector. The arrival of Admiral Slossar’s fleet, and the activation of its three interdictors, played out as planned. The combined Alliance-Imperial fleets had the Nagai-Mandalorian forces severely outgunned, and with the expanded gravity wells brought up, they had no place to run to either.

Victory was clearly theirs, and satisfaction showed on the face of the Imperial admirals, but Stazi didn't feel any himself. The Mandalorians were mercenaries, and he was sure that if things got dire they'd cut and run, even if they had to slog through the interdiction field to get out. The Nagai, however, were ferocious fighters. At the first battle at Terminus they'd had to be beaten into submission and the fight had been costly for all sides. He hoped but doubted their attitude had changed since.

The battle raged on, and to his surprise the Mandalorian and Nagai ships didn't try to work around the Imperials and form joint clusters. Instead the Nagai fought the Imperials while the Mandalorians fought the Alliance ships, and none seemed to be making a break out of Terminus' frenzied orbit. The interdictors sat far past the planet's moons, unmolested as they kept the enemy from fleeing.

After some fifteen minutes, Stazi muttered, "Perhaps we should try hailing the Nagai and demand a surrender."

"I doubt that would work," Yage said. "Besides, our tactical computers can't even identify their flagship."

"Nor the Mandalorians'," Bey added.

Stazi's mind drifted back to the first battle at Terminus. With a pang he remembered his old ship and his old captain. *Indomitable* and Jaius Yorub were both long gone, perished together in battle against Krayt. Back then the stout, unpretentious Sullustan had figured out a way to trace Nagai communications and from their pinpoint the root of their command tree.

He tried to recall the details but was interrupted by the sudden appearance of yellow markers in the middle of the tactical holo. The symbols flashed as the computer tried to decide what to make of them, and Stazi thought was that the holo was experiencing a glitch. The markers had appeared out of nowhere at the edge of Terminus' natural orbit, behind Admiral Slossar's battle groups and well within the interdiction field.

That was impossible: any ship racing to Terminus would have been wrenched from hyperspace at the edge of the artificial gravity well, hundreds of thousands of kilometers away.

Everyone in the room was stunned speechless. When the computer decided on a designation for those newcomers, the admirals still stared in wordless shock.

With surprising calm, Hogrum Chalk said, "There must be a mistake. This is impossible."

Admiral Fenel slapped the controls at the edge of the table and patched in a direct line with the Imperial flagship. "General?" he said. "General Jaeger, do you copy? Please respond."

After a long thirty seconds, a small holo-image of the Imperial formed beneath the main display. "Reporting, Admiral."

"Oron, what the hell just joined the fight? Our tactical display says they're--"

"Ssi-ruuk, sir," Jaeger confirmed the impossible. "Twelve of their warships have just jumped into the middle of the fight."

"Are you happy, Mandalore?" Nihl whispered, sharp teeth bared in a feral grin as he bent close to the comm station. "Do you trust me now?"

Yaga Auchs was stunned past speaking, just like most of the *Krish'nakt's* crew. Nihl reveled in it; the Second Battle of Terminus had been a carefully arranged drama, mounting tension and upping the stakes with one surprise after another. Finally he'd made the climactic reveal, one which neither his enemies nor allies had expected.

Finally the mercenary said, "What are your orders?"

"Targets of opportunity. The Ssi-ruuk will take care of the interdictors. I recommend focusing on the Imperials. Hurt the enemy as much as you can."

After another pause Auchs asked, "Should we capture their ships or destroy them?"

"Destroy," Nihl said. He'd weighed the value of prisoners versus that of shock and awe, and come down in favor of the latter. "Happy hunting, Mandalore."

Auchs grunted and closed the link. Still grinning, Nihl stalked to the front of the bridge so he could witness the carnage with his own eyes. From the position of the Nagai ships the Ssi-ruuk were far out, beyond the clusters of

Alliance, Imperial, and Mandalorian ships. Nonetheless, he could make them out for their usual ovoid shapes, vaguely resembling insectoid faces with sensor- and weapon-packed blisters for eyes and vehicle launch bays for jaws. They'd joined the battle exactly where and when he wanted them to, a sign that his months of negotiation with their Shreeftut hadn't been in vain. Neither, clearly, had the Ssi-ruuk's recent overtures to Bakura, the closest major Federation planet to their interstellar Imperium. The Ssi-ruuk had successfully wooed some of their P'w'eck ex-slaves and convinced the lesser saurians to steal key scraps of Bakuran technology, most notably hyperwave inertial momentum sustainers.

The HIMS devices, developed by Bakuran engineers over a century ago, created a sustained static hyperspace bubble around equipped ships, which allowed them to continue through an artificial gravity well on inertia rather than being immediately yanked out of lightspeed. Theoretically a game-changer in interstellar warfare, the HIMS devices were prone to malfunction and only of use in limited situations. Unreliable supply and low demand had led to the experimental technology being nearly forgotten, but not by Nihl.

The Ssi-ruuk seemed to have adapted the HIMS wonderfully to their ships. The Alliance vessels were responding slowly, no doubt due to crews who literally didn't believe their eyes. The Ssi-ruuk hadn't waged war in the charted galaxy for over a century, and their bizarre craft would be recognizable only by military historians.

The most critical part of the attack, however, was invisible from Nihl's range. The ovoid Ssi-ruuk vessels were currently belching out thousands of small droid starfighters, each pyramidal drone barely larger than a standing Nagai, incredibly maneuverable and very difficult to hit. Their deployment would mark the finishing blow of this fight; in a sense, Nihl could have never started his campaign without them.

The sudden silence in the Force had unexpected side effects across the galaxy. The vampiric Anzati, he'd been told, could no longer drink their victim's minds with the Force dead;

rumor said many had gone mad. The Ssi-ruuk, who'd never been known to touch the Force, had nonetheless relied on it when transferring their prisoners' essences via the entechment scheme. One Sith researchers suggested they'd appropriated ancient Rakatan technology to convert life energy to fuel, which seemed plausible to Nihl. True or not, the system of technological slavery on which their empire was built had collapsed overnight, throwing the entire Imperium into chaos.

It was into that situation that Nihl had arrived, promising stability for the Ssi-ruuk and a replacement for their lost entechment. The aliens were warlike and xenophobic, used to seeing outsiders as either threats or prey. In that they were not unlike the Nagai, but like Nihl's people they had a practical streak beneath their violent fanaticism. To sustain their empire, they'd allowed Nihl to help. He'd delivered them a chance to expand beyond their wildest imagining.

Even before he'd lost the Force, Nihl had been planning for conquest. He'd quietly made allies among another secretive and neglected race, the Geonosians. The insectoid droidmakers had been laboring in obscurity for over a century, devising new machines and selling them to private clients, but a lack of raw materials had made it impossible to construct the droid armies they once had. Through Nihl's intercession, they'd agreed to modify their droid brains for use in the Ssi-ruuk's already-existing droid starfighters. Thus the Geonosians and Ssi-ruuk opened new doors to each other, and in turn the Nagai gained opening for such conquest as they'd never seen before.

It was all such impressive serendipity, Nihl couldn't help but wonder if the Force was working its will through him, even if he could no longer hear it.

He liked to think so. As he stood on *Krish'nakt's* bridge and watched the explosions light up across the Alliance fleet, he felt like a true Dark Lord, master of all he saw.

In the Coruscant situation room, aghast silence had been replaced by choruses of frantic orders interspersed with long minutes of tensely watching the display holo. There was little the admirals could do from half a galaxy away except, and

Jaeger and Slossar were doing the best they could with the situation they'd been given.

The Ssi-ruuk were essentially an untested foe, and the Alliance vessels were the first to be thrown against them. When Slossar's Mon Calamari cruisers got close enough they were able to deal substantial damage to the strange ovoid battle cruisers, but not enough to knock any out of the fight. Few capital ships got close enough for direct combat; the Ssi-ruuk's tiny droid starfighters swarmed like piranha beetles around smaller corvettes and frigates, tearing them to pieces, and the squadrons of Crossfire and Twintail fighters that attempted to engage were similarly ripped apart. The heavy cruisers' shields deflected laser attacks and suicidal dive-bombing by the droids, but the craft were staggered by constant attacks and unable to mount a coherent counter-offensive against the Ssi-ruuk.

The Imperials, meanwhile, were struggling against the combined forces of the Nagai and Mandalorians. Both enemies used small, fast, heavy-hitting attack craft, and while the star destroyers could defend themselves it was the smaller capital ships that again took the brunt of the assault. Frigates and corvettes were blasted apart by concentrated assaults, and the Imperials began to lose their protective fighter screen.

When it became too much, Slossar hailed Coruscant and said he was withdrawing. He didn't bother to ask, but at that moment none of the admirals would deny him. Stazi and the others watched as the tactical holo, with clinical precision, showed the three interdictors drop their artificial gravity wells, returning Terminus' own to its natural state. They interdictors then fired their hyperdrives and jumped out of the Terminus system, the first ships to escape.

Slossar and Jaeger tried to coordinate an orderly withdrawal, but it quickly turned to shambles. Alliance ships tried to push through swarms of Ssi-ruuvi war droids. None escaped without damage and several ships were utterly destroyed. The Imperials fared even worse. Despite having no apparent coordination between their fleets the Nagai, Mandalorians, and Ssi-ruuk fell on the fleeing star destroyers and savaged them. One two-kilometer-long warship was

destroyed outright after being trapped with a Ssi-ruuk cruiser on either flank and a Nagai attack pack on its aft. A second destroyer was crippled and, on Jaeger's permission, broadcast a surrender signal. The Coruscant war room watched in wordless horror as it was surrounded by the Ssi-ruuk and pounded to lifeless debris.

As the first of Jaeger's ships finally escaped to hyperspace, Admiral Fenel finally muttered, "The bastards. The despicable bastards..."

"I don't understand," whispered Bey. "I thought the Ssi-ruuk powered their droids with life energy from slaves. They had their..."

"Entechment process," Chalk supplied. "There have been... indications the process no longer worked."

"Those droids worked damn fine just now," Fenel snarled. "How did it happen? How?"

The intelligence director looked away, ashamed. The other admirals watched as Jaeger's flagship jumped out of the system. The surveillance satellites, which had been recording the whole battle, hung further out, well clear of the battle zone, and after all the Federation warships had left Terminus they remained to broadcast the planet's holo-image, surrounded on all sides by hostile red.

"May the gods help the people down there," Bey muttered.

Because we can't, Stazi thought. Weariness settled over him. For the past few years he'd dared hope it was done, that the galaxy was finally free of fighting that tore apart entire star sectors. War never ended; he knew that deep in his bones, but still, he'd dared hope.

As the admirals watched the holo with grim expressions, a ping sounded. Admiral Yage turned toward the door and called, "Enter."

A human lieutenant stepped in. He seemed surprised by the sight inside, though whether it was all the admiral's bars that impressed him or their uniformly grim faces, Stazi couldn't tell.

The young man swallowed, then delivered another blow. "Sirs, we have news from Bavinyar. I'm afraid something terrible has happened."

Interlude: A Long Time Ago...

Swords of light flashed through the night, crashed together, sparked and withdrew, then crashed again. Warriors- human, Twi'lek, Noghri, Sith, Wookiee, and other races- battled against massive beasts with eyestalks jutting from the sides of their heads and wide mouths lined with rows of knife-sharp teeth. Laserfire rained down from towering mechanical monstrosities and gutted entire city blocks in bursts of flame. Starships looped and wheeled and chased each other through a sky filled with smoke. Darker than the air was the Force itself. The savagery of the invaders and the desperation of the invaded combined to create a storm blacker and more dangerous than anything ever known. It was a vision of war more savage than anything a Je'daii could have imagined before the Rakata came.

It was agony to endure the vision, but Tasha Ryo forced herself to hold on. Countless lives, perhaps the survival of the Je'daii themselves, could depend on it. She forced herself to see every detail and commit to memory every face wrenched in anger or pain, the snapping jaws of every Rakata flesh raider, and most of all the city in which they fought. She searched for familiar buildings even as they were toppled by explosion after explosion. When she recognized enough she finally let herself withdraw.

Escaping the dream was almost as bad as the dream itself. She returned to a body writhing in sweat-damp green robes, lying on a round bed in her chambers. When she sat upright she forced herself to breathe slowly and calm her pounding heart. During her years of training as a Je'daii seer her

masters had taught her how to hold on to the details of a retreating vision. She did that now, even as her mind revolted against what she saw.

When she was certain she'd mentally assembled the dream-fragments as best as she could, Tasha rose from her bed and left the chamber with staggered steps. Every hallway of her father's fortress was familiar to her from a young age, and she followed well-worn corridors to the chamber that had become, over the past few months, a war room from which the defense of Shikaakwa was commanded.

It was something she'd never imagined when she was younger. She'd been born into one of the most prominent criminal families on Shikaakwa, seventh planet of the Tythan system. Once her Force abilities had been detected she'd been taken to the Je'daii itself, but Shikaakwa had always been home and her father, Volnos Ryo, had always prodded her to leave her studies and become his heir. War had ravaged the planet in the years immediately after her birth but the world she'd known had always been peaceful, and she'd never doubted that it would continue to rebuild for years to come.

Then the visions had started, promising pain and ruin unlike anything her people had seen before. Then the Rakata themselves had arrived, and for the past ten months they'd been waging war all across the Tythan system, taking the outermost planets and trying to force their way to Tython itself. The Je'daii had repulsed them once but the Rakata had regrouped on Ska Gora and initiated another thrust to take Shikaakwa, which would in turn be stepping-stone for their final prize.

Tasha's home had become a battleground. Every dream and vision had become a nightmare. She'd gone weeks without sound sleep, lost weight, and felt constantly enervated, but she knew there was no escape. She tried to tell herself she was doing her part for the war effort and defending against the Rakata as best she could. There was no joy in her dreams but the agony she suffered were less than the Je'daii warriors like her uncle Hawk who were taking the fight directly to the enemy. Who were bleeding and dying and being consumed by their own anger.

When Tasha reached the war room she found it mostly empty. It was late at night on this part of the planet and, it seemed, there were no battles currently raging. She was unsurprised, however, to spot her father standing over a map at the room's central table, scowling at what he saw. She came around to face him and saw the bags under his eyes. He'd been getting as little sleep as her nowadays.

Unlike his brother and daughter, Volnos had been neither blessed nor cursed with the Force. He was stolid, hard-headed and practical, and had been reluctant to let her train on Tython at all. She knew he was not at all happy that Shikaakwa had become the prime battleground in what he saw as the Je'daii's war.

"Father," she said, "I saw something important."

His eyes flicked up to her. "A vision?"

"That's right. You need to know about it. The Je'daii Masters do too."

He exhaled and planted fists on the table. As a practical man he'd been reluctant to draw battle plans based on anyone's Force-visions, even his daughter's, but as the fight for Shikaakwa intensified he'd learned to use any tool that presented itself.

"Another battle?" he asked.

"I saw them coming at us with a full army. Flesh raiders. Annihilator machines. Aircraft." She swallowed. "They'll attack Gartolan."

His eyes narrowed. "Gartolan. Are you sure?"

"I know that city, father. I saw it being smashed to rubble in my dream." She closed her eyes and summoned fragments of memory as her teachers had shown her. "The grand clock tower. The arena on the hillside and the gardens by the river. They'll all burn."

Volnos didn't seem convinced. He stabbed a finger at the map. "We thought they were going after Volkedan next. Our reconnaissance spotted them marshalled in the wetlands fifty kilometers south of that city."

"It's *Gartolan*, father. I know it."

He studied the map. She could tell he was making hard calculations and she waited until he said, "If they attack Gartolan they'll have to draw forces from the encampment

near Volkedan. It's their nearest base and I don't think they'd draw their supply lines any thinner than they have to."

He was coming up with a plan, good. "Then we'll intercept them on the way to Gartolan."

"Perhaps." He tapped the spot on the map marking the encampment near Volkedan. "But if we know their forces will be weak here, it's the perfect time to strike."

"But what about Gartolan?"

"We can add some defenders."

"We'd need more than *some* to stop the offensive I saw in my vision."

Her father's face went hard. "The imperative isn't to stop these Rakata, it's to destroy them. If they're using as many troops as you say, we'll be able to send in our own offensive and annihilate their base near Volkedan. Without supplies or good defensive redoubts, what's left of their army will be vulnerable. Even if they *do* take Gartolan."

"They weren't taking it, father, they were *destroying* it."

"Then they'll have nothing to defend themselves with, no place to make a stand when we come to crush them. We have to crush them, Tasha, or they'll crush us."

She saw his hard logic. It made her want to weep. This was a war of the most brutal attrition. Thousands had died already, both among the Je'daii and Shikaakwa's natives. Leaving Gartolan exposed to allow a strike at their weakened base might drive the Rakata off this world sooner, but it was still a deliberate choice to surrender thousands more lives.

Tasha swallowed and said, "We have to tell the Masters about this plan."

"I know. I can't so much as breathe without the Je'daii's approval." Her father scowled and drummed thick fingers on the tabletop. "But I don't think it will be too hard to get. Ranger Brock is resting right now, but I'll wake her up. Once she agrees I'm sure the Masters will too."

He was probably right on that score. As the war had grown desperate the Je'daii had been increasingly thrown off the balance they'd sustained more centuries. Rangers and warriors were being drawn more and more to the darkness within them, unleashing anger and aggression to counter the Rakata's own. But while the Rakatan armies had been

trained solely to use the dark, it was an unfamiliar thing to the Je'daii, who struggled with its awesome but dangerous power.

Whatever way this war ended, the Je'daii would be changed forever, and Tasha couldn't see how it would work out for the good.

Volnos got on the comm and woke up the other Je'daii staying in Fortress Ryo. Less than ten minutes she appeared, and Tasha was surprised to find her fully dressed. Lanoree Brock was a human woman about five years older than Tasha, tall with long brown hair that spilled over the shoulders of her brown jacket and red scarf. She wore black boots and a metal sword slanted from her left hip; she'd come ready for anything.

Volnos saw it too. "No need for battle just yet, Ranger Brock. Let us explain the situation."

They did just that. Tasha repeated the contents of her vision, and her father reiterated his plan to let the Rakata attack Gartolan and leave their backs undefended. He tersely outlined his reasoning; Lanoree Brock listened, eyes narrowed, thinking. In the end she agreed with a tiny nod.

Tasha had expected that. She didn't know Lanoree well, but the older woman had once been a Ranger who'd crisscrossed the Tythan system alone. Like her uncle Hawk she'd experienced her share of danger. Like Hawk, like all of them, the war against the Rakata had taken its toll. If her eyes had ever had a light of adventure in them, it was gone now.

When everything had been said, Lanoree asked, "Do you know when the battle will come?"

Tasha shook her head. "Maybe days. Maybe hours. I can never tell."

Volnos grunted. "I wish the Force would explain itself every now and then."

Tasha didn't blame him for his anger. She felt the same way. She'd trained to become a Je'daii seer because she'd thought the Force might give her a glimpse of enlightenment. Instead she was mired in increasing uncertainty.

"You should try and get some real rest now. You've earned it," Volnos told his daughter. "I'll go to the comm center and

try to call Master Ketu. Ranger Brock, can I rely on your support?"

"You can," Lanoree nodded.

"Glad to hear it," Volnos said bitterly, then left the chamber.

Tasha sighed and told the human woman, "Forgive my father. He's already seen one war on Shikaakwa, and he blames the Je'daii for that one too."

"He's not the only one," Lanoree exhaled. She put a hand on Tasha's shoulder and gave it a small squeeze. "Thank you, Seer Ryo. You might have helped us turn the tide of the war."

The tide had seemingly turned before, but then it turned back. The Rakata were relentless. "I just do what I can."

Tasha took a few steps away, expecting Lanoree to follow Volnos to the comm center. Instead the woman said, "A question, Seer Ryo?"

Tasha turned. "Of course, Ranger Brock."

Lanoree hesitated a moment, then asked, "Is it true that the Masters think there's a hypergate located in the Chasm beneath Anil Kesh?"

Tasha hadn't expected that. "Why are you asking?"

"I've tried asking your uncle, but he avoids the question. Your father doesn't care. But other Je'daii say that Hawk saw a hypergate when he went down into the Chasm with Daegen Lok. Has he told you about that?"

Tasha heard the unspoken question: *Have you seen it in your visions?* The answer to both was yes, but Tasha didn't think she had the clarity Lanoree wanted. She could hear the ache for it in the other woman's voice.

"My uncle found something in the Chasm," Tasha said. "Daegen Lok did too. It nearly drove them both mad." Many would say in Lok's case it succeeded.

"But what was it?" pressed Lanoree.

"I'm not sure if they saw something so much as they felt a distortion in the Force. But my uncle says he sensed war and destruction coming to Tython- like it has now. And he says he saw stars and planets without number... Some of the Masters think it might have been a Kwa infinity gate."

Lanoree frowned. "The Kwa? Not the Gree?"

“The Gree? I don’t think so. They say the Old City was built by the Gree, but the gate in the Chasm- if it exists at all- sounds like it was built by the Kwa.” Tasha saw her confusion and added, “This is all speculation, based on a Kwa holocron we recovered. It said the Gree gates only linked to specific partners, while the Kwa gates could transport matter anywhere in the galaxy..”

“In other words,” Lanoree said faintly. “The worlds the Tho Yor took us from.”

“Maybe,” Tasha said. “Though if the Rakata really have overrun the rest of the galaxy, I don’t think we have any homes to go back to.”

“Maybe.” The human sighed tiredly. “It’s all unanswered questions, isn’t it? Unanswerable.”

“Perhaps. I didn’t realize you were interested in the gates.”

“I’m not. Wasn’t. My... brother researched them.” She emanated sadness in the Force. “But he died.”

“Ah,” said Tasha, and nothing else. She hadn’t even known Ranger Brock had a brother. He sounded like one more casualty of the Rakata.

“Right now we need to concentrate on the defense of Shikaakwa,” Tasha said. “My father’s waiting for you to help argue with the Masters.”

“He’ll get it.” Lanoree drew herself straight. “Thank you, Seer Ryo.”

Tasha inclined her head and watched Lanoree walk swiftly from the room. When the human was gone, she retreated to her chambers. She moved through the darkness, lay down on her bed again, closed her eyes, and waited for more visions to come. Usually the Force gave her some reprieve after a prophetic dream. She felt herself grow weak with sleep and nothing reared to consume her.

She was glad. Even after her prophetic abilities were recognized she’d never been happy with them. What the Force revealed to her was more often aggravating than helpful. Even before the Rakata invasion, when her visions had been more benign, she’d seen fragments of events without context. Sometimes those fragments had shown her events that would play out, other times things that could be changed. The Masters said the future was not a solid thing,

and that what the Force showed her were tiny flecks of what might be. There was no certainty in them and nowadays no comfort. Tasha found herself wishing, more and more, that she'd never been cursed with the Force at all.

As she lay in the dark and tried for some real sleep, a new kind of vision came to her. At first she didn't realize it was a vision at all because it lacked the violence, fire, and death that had wracked her dreams since the war began. There seemed something peaceful, almost fey about the scene that resolved before her. She saw a great arch, perhaps thirty meters high, seemingly carved from stone and wedged between steep canyon walls. She knew it as one of the ancient gates she'd seen in Master A'nan's holocron, which could apparently transport matter instantaneously between worlds. The entire world scene cast in a ghostly blue-white light, as though bathed by a superheated sun.

She recognized the creatures moving around the gate's base as Kwa for their long necks, blue hides, and long reptilian faces. Some seemed to tend to the gate itself, while others sat in small groups around its base. Some conversed; others seem engaged in quiet study. She saw several who seemed to be writing into paper tomes. Those gathered, though alien, had the distinct air of scholars. Among the herd of blue saurians were other aliens with bulbous heads and large black eyes held upright by thick tentacles. From descriptions and rough sketches she'd seen in the Je'daii archives, Tasha recognized them as Gree.

This vision was such a reprieve from the ones of war that she didn't immediately realize it was a vision at all. In the days when she'd had normal dreams, untouched by Force prescience, Tasha had experienced them through her own eyes. She was not present among these Kwa and Gree. Like her prophetic dreams, she seemed to be viewing through omniscient roving eyes.

With understanding came new confusion. Tasha knew that her visions always showed the future, always. These ancient aliens were supposed to be long gone and their gates destroyed, but for her to be receiving this vision meant that at least one such gate must still be extant. Perhaps, she thought, it was the Kwa homeworld, or some other place they'd

gathered for refuge against the Rakata. However, that gave no explanation for the Gree scattered among them.

Her sleeping mind tried to make sense of these things like but it was like groping for air while trapped underwater. She couldn't even rouse from sleep. The quiet scene was interrupted by the emergence of light from the mouth of the gate. Straight luminous lines slanted from the stone frame and intersected at right angles to form a perfect grid. The Kwa and Gree all turned in attention as the lines grew thicker, the grid brighter. Soon they'd all packed around it but left a clear and deliberate space immediately in front, as though expecting something to emerge. Many Kwa raised their long arms into the air, while the Gree flailed tentacles. They seemed to Tasha expressions of adulation, even worship.

The light-beams in the grid grew thicker, the gate brighter until it was absolutely blinding. None of the Kwa or Gree looked away. Tasha tried to hold to the vision and see what came through the gate; out of the wall of light marched more Kwa and more Gree, but there was one anomalous figure. Two legs, two arms, a straight body; a head topped by long dark hair. A human, Tasha realized, and tried to focus on that silhouette as it staggered from the gate.

Then, suddenly, the light went out. The gate was closed, leaving an empty arch behind, but those who'd passed through were clearer. Tasha focused on the human and was shocked to find her familiar. Though her features were more worn than they'd been a minute ago, the woman was unmistakably Lanoree Brock, Je'daii ranger.

Without even willing it, Tasha left her sleep. She opened eyes to see only the darkness of her chamber. She wasn't breathing hard this time, and her mind didn't rattle with the desperation and anger of others. Instead she felt dimly confused, a little curious. She was, she realized, still very tired.

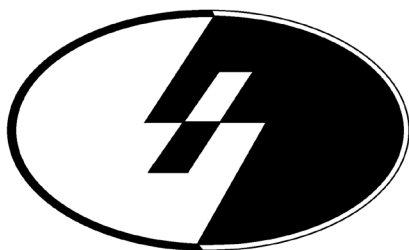
True sleep was claiming her fast. She had no understanding of what she'd seen. Perhaps it had been just a dream after all. A welcome reprieve from all her terrible visions. The details were already fading.

Tasha closed her eyes again and let her body relax on the bed. Force-vision or mere imagination, that scene had

instilled her with calm. If such a gathering had taken place it had been far from the Rakata, it meant there were still some placed in the galaxy where the Force remained in balance, a haven for ancient races and new Je'daii both.

It was comfort Tasha needed. She let darkness and rare peace claim her.

PART II



THE MYSTERY OF DARKNESS

Chapter Eleven

When Ganner stepped into the chamber he was immediately struck by the artificial chill in the air, the bleakness of the lights, and the reek of disinfectant. His eyes immediately fell from the pale walls to the two bodies laid on biers in the center of the room and the empress standing over them.

Antares looked disconcertingly calm as he lay there, hands folded over his chest as though to hide the place where the sniper's blast had taken him. The Bavinyari medics had changed him out of his wet clothes into a simple white tunic that looked stiff and unnatural on him. They'd dredged Sekh-Mad-Har and the airspeeder's pilot from the bottom of the channel as well and prepared the two Imperial Knights for transport back to Coruscant. As much as he respected the Cerean, all of Ganner's attention was drawn to his friend's body, and woman standing stricken over it.

Marasiah wore the same white robe they'd thrown on her after pulling her from the water twelve hours ago. His hair, rich brown with a thick streak of white, was a messy tangle falling on either side of her face. She didn't react when Ganner entered the room, nor when he stepped close. She simply continued to stare down at her husband's calm face, perhaps remembering peaceful times she and Antares had shared.

Ganner stepped on the opposite side of the bier and she still didn't look at him. Part of him wished he could reach out with the Force to soothe her; the other half was glad he couldn't feel her pain.

Because he was just a man now, Ganner had to reach her with simple tools. He raised his voice and said, "The Bavinyar Security Force has locked down both islands. Nobody's entered or left since... since the attempt on your life. They're willing to let you go back to Coruscant, of course, but they've promised to see this investigation through."

Marasiah blinked repeatedly. It was her first reaction to his presence. Still looking at Antares she asked, "Do they have suspects?"

"No. They've examined the wreckage of the speeder. They say the starboard engine must have been hit. They think it was a high-powered portable weapon. It was probably the sniper from the bridge. How many people were involved in this, we can't really say..."

Ganner trailed off. There was no telling who had done this or why. The possibilities were vast and terrifying to contemplate. He wished they had something specific, anything. He needed a focus for the anger, hate, and grief welling inside him. He needed someone to hold responsible.

The empress asked, "What about Astraal and Master Rae?"

"They'll be all right," he said. Neither had suffered so much as a scratch, but it felt wrong to say so. "Majesty, I think you should head back to Coruscant soon. Especially given what's happened at Terminus. The admirals will have all kinds of questions, and the people need to see you."

"You mean they need to see my strength?" Marasiah said bitterly.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to presume."

Marasiah sniffed and drew herself straight. "A leader must always be seen to be strong. My father told me that, many times. I always tried to follow that rule. Even when we lost the throne. When Darth Havok killed my mother, and when my father died."

Ganner remembered all those times. He'd admired her stoicism then, but everyone had a breaking point. He wondered if the Force gave her any strength at a time like this.

The empress lifted her head to look Ganner in the eye. "You said *I* should go to Coruscant. Not *we*."

He nodded. "I'd like to stay on Bavinyar and help find Antares' killer. I've talked to Azlyn, and she wants to stay too. Astraal's agreed to take you back to Coruscant."

The phrase suggested she needed to be cared for and he immediately regretted it, but Marasiah didn't object. "You're not a police detective, Master Krieg. What do you think you can do without the Force?"

"I don't know, but someone has to be here to watch the investigation and make sure they find the assassin." He swallowed and pressed on. "Majesty, we failed you. We failed you and we failed Antares and if we can't make up for it this way--"

"Don't," she said, quiet but firm. "There was nothing you could have done. I felt the attack coming in the Force and I..." She looked back at the body between them. "I couldn't do enough either."

Ganner let a long moment pass, then asked, "So can we stay?"

She nodded. Another silence passed, and then Marasiah said, "Can I tell you something, Ganner? Something you must never tell anyone?"

That she'd used his first name struck him as much as the question. "Of course," he whispered.

"Antares killed my father."

The words rocked him almost as much as his friend's death. his mind filled with questions, but also understanding. Antares' listlessness since Roan Fel's death made shocking sense. He'd been carrying regret deeper than even Ganner had imagined.

He licked dry lips and asked, "Why did he kill the emperor?"

"My father was.... an angry man. He lost his father and brother to the Sith on the same day. And later on he lost his wife, and then his empire. There was so much hate in my father... During the final battle for Coruscant, it got control of him."

"There was love in him too."

"I know." Marasiah sniffed. "There was so much light in him that for a long time I couldn't see the darkness. I didn't *really* see it until that last battle. He was willing to wipe out

every life on Coruscant, just to slay the Sith. All those billions of lives... He had to be stopped. Antares was the only one strong enough to do it."

Ganner's mind flashed back to all the arguments they'd had over the years. So often it had been Ganner arguing that their duty as Imperial Knights was to the light side of the Force, while Antares had insisted their emperor was final arbiter of right and wrong. Behind his friend's stubborn patriotism had been a deep conflict between duty and justice, but he'd never imagined the conflict would resolve itself in such a way.

Despite his grief and shock, Ganner also found himself proud to have known a man with the strength to choose right, even if it meant betraying his emperor.

"It had to be done," Marasiah whispered. "I know that. And I think Antares did by the end. I think he accepted it."

He looked at his friend's calm face and saw it in a way he never had before. "I hope so."

Marasiah's hands balled to fists at her side. "Do what you have to do see justice done, Ganner."

"I will, Majesty. I promise."

Gar Stazi was a soldier, not a spy, but after barely surviving the machinations of the Sith-Imperial War he'd learned to be suspicious. The events at Terminus and Bavinyar seemed to incredible too coincide by accident.

Unfortunately, the details were aggravatingly unclear. A day after the dual tragedies, Marasiah Fel's shuttle was en route back to Coruscant with the body of her husband aboard. The assassin had yet to be found and Bavinyar's security team was collaborating with the empress' agents to get to the bottom of it. Terminus, meanwhile, was totally shielded from view after the Nagai found and destroyed the Federation's observation satellites. No one had any idea of the planet's conquerers had thrown a party or massacred the entire population.

Hogrum Chalk was normally not a man who emoted much; not only was his demeanor reserved but his face was mostly obscured by burn scars and mechanical implants. Nonetheless, the intelligence director's frustration was plain as he explained all he didn't know to Stazi.

“Jaeger and Slossar have regrouped most of their fleets at Sluis Van,” Chalk said. “They’ve been sending scout ships, edging closer to the occupied sectors, so hopefully they’ll have more to report soon.”

Stazi had already heard as much from Slossar. Pacing behind his desk he asked, “How in the hell did the Ssi-ruuk get into the picture? I thought they’d been acting civilized recently.”

“The Ssi-ruuk entered into negotiations with the humans and P’w’eck on Bakura. Just hours before the attack on Terminus, they withdrew without warning, taking some P’w’eck with them. From what Ambassador Storr’s been telling us, the Ssi-ruuk were trying to drive a wedge between the humans and P’w’eck. If we thought their intentions benign we may have been seeing only what we wanted to see.”

“Is Storr still on Bakura?”

“Yes. The Jedi too, Master Vao.”

Stazi knew the diplomatic corps been giving the Jedi pity work and didn’t see how it could help here. “Send more intel agents. I’m betting someone on Bakura knows more than what they’re telling.”

“I agree. Getting straight answers from the P’w’eck won’t be easy, but we will try.”

“Good. I’m also going to be sending more ships to Sluis Van. They’ll need reinforcements.”

“Admiral Bey?”

“That’s right. I know I don’t have authority to order any Imperial admirals anywhere, but Jaeger will need backup too.”

“He’s requested it. Fenel and Yage are sorting deployments out now.”

“Good,” Stazi nodded. He wasn’t foolish enough to think a crisis would bind Imperial and Alliance together, but it didn’t seem to be cleaving them apart. “What has the empress had to say about this? I only talked to her briefly before she left Bavinyar.”

Chalk inhaled. “She’s yet to address the Ssi-ruuvi situation directly. I’m afraid what happened on Bavinyar has hit her very hard.”

"I understand what's happened, and it's a tragedy, but we can't allow it to slow our reaction to this new threat. I think that might have been *why* she was attacked in the first place."

Chalk raised one brow. "Do you?"

"I don't have evidence. Call me paranoid if you want."

"No, the thought occurred to me too. I'm looking into it, I assure you."

"Thank you," Stazi said. Jumping at shadows was Chalk's job.

"I'm taking both these crises very seriously. Until they're dealt with, they'll be prioritized above everything else."

Stazi didn't like something in those words. "You're not referring to the speaker's election, are you?"

Chalk hesitated, avoiding the admiral's eyes. He seemed to calculate the costs and befits of silence before saying, "Considering the current threats, and in respect for the empress' grief, several senators are drafting a plan to delay the vote."

"Imperial senators? Eldon?" He'd thought Bastion's candidate would want to get the vote over now, while public sympathy for Marasiah was high, but then these were Imperials, always looking for a quick way to shed the trappings of democracy.

"They'll present the resolution when it's ready," Chalk said vaguely.

"No. Absolutely not. If democracy gets suspended for every crisis it's not a democracy at all. The election must go forward."

"With all due respect, that's for the senate to decide, per the agreement *you* pushed the empress to accept."

Stazi glared at the man. "You're right. That's for the senate to decide. I'll respect its decision."

"I'm very glad," Chalk said, without a hint of mocking.

Stazi was glad when the human left his office, but now he was angry as well as edgy. He should have seen a move to block the election coming; Marasiah's honorable nature had lulled his defenses against the usual Imperial backstabbing. He hated politics and hated being trapped to a desk on Coruscant. Given the choice he'd much rather be riding to war against the Ssi-ruuk with Slossar and Bey.

But he was stuck here, and he still had to do what he could to protect Alliance values. Once he'd calmed himself, Stazi dropped into the chair behind his desk, activated his encrypted personal comm system, and patched in a call to Senator Porat Derrol's residence.

The holo-image over his desk resolved not to the long-horned Chagrian senator but to his hornless wife. "Good afternoon, Madam Derrol," he said. "Is the senator available?"

"He's at a Justice Council meeting. He won't be back until the evening. Do you have a message for him?"

Stazi hesitated. This woman had no official standing, but he had more important things to do than play comm tag with Derrol, and the senator had specifically said she could be trusted with anything.

"If Porat doesn't know already," he said, "Some imperial senators are drawing up legislation to postpone the speaker vote. Out of respect for the empress' grief, they'll say."

"I see." Her expression clouded.

"I hope you do. If we're going to transition this new government to democracy we can't let the Imperials derail us at the very start. Porat, Brighton, and their allies need to pool support to stop this motion."

"I understand. Thank you for telling us, Admiral."

"I'm doing what I can protect Alliance values."

"Just like you always have." She smiled faintly. "I'll let them know immediately."

The holo shut off, ending the short call. Stazi slumped in his chair and thought. What he'd been doing might have been a violation of the neutrality agreement he'd made with Marasiah, but he felt no regret whatsoever. If he'd been a stickler for rules he'd have surrendered with the rest of the Alliance at Caamas and Krayt would still reign supreme. Then as now, he answered to no authority except his conscience. In his heart he knew he'd done the right thing.

Despite all that was happening, Stazi smiled. It was good to know he was still himself, even trapped behind a desk.

The Bavinyari clearly weren't used to being the center of galactic attention, and their security agency threw every

possible resource into hunting for the assassin. With so much manpower on the case, all of which knew Cephalia better than Ganner and Azlyn ever could, there was little for the Imperial Knights to do except stand over the investigators' shoulders. The Bavinyari treated them with a mix of respect, obsequiousness, and just a little fear, the kind they rarely got on Coruscant lately. It almost felt like the old days.

Local authorities seemed to be doing everything correctly. They'd placed Cephalia and Maressa on lockdown. It was guaranteed that no spacecraft, airspeeders, or even boats had left the islands since the assassination attempt. They'd taken Ganner's tip about the sniper on the maglev bridge and were pouring over every scrap of security footage to track unauthorized access.

They were taking the right steps, but Ganner still bristled with impatience. As they waited Azlyn theorized aloud why the attack had taken place.

"Bavinyar's always had an anti-authority streak," she said. "There's bound to be a lot of people who are mad that we've basically forced them to accept millions of refugees."

Guessing games were pointless when they had no facts. He knew Azlyn was trying to distract him from his grief and decided to play along. "Whoever attacked us had military-grade equipment and knew how to use it. They also knew how to get onto that maglev bridge. That says they had a plan in advance."

"Depending on how hard it is to get on that bridge, they might have thrown it together quickly." Though they were alone inside the Bavinyar Security Agency headquarters she lowered her voice. "They might have been sent by someone with government connections, someone who's not happy with the deal that got rammed down their throats."

"Maybe. Or maybe this is about something else."

"You mean what's happening in the Outer Rim?"

"Or the senate elections. Or something else. Maybe even the Sith, or what's left of them." In a way he *wanted* it to be Sith. Better Antares die because of them than some random angry local.

"We'll just have to see where the evidence leads," Azlyn muttered.

Hours later they were drawn into a private office by the BSA's chief director, a middle-aged human named Doral. He carried himself like a man itching to act, and Ganner knew they'd found a hot lead.

"We were able to analyze the security feeds from either side of the maglev bridge," Doral explained as he removed a portable holo-projector from his pocket.

He tapped it once and began flipping through magnified images, grainy and medium-resolution like most security holo-cams took. He tapped through several shots of a human male in a light-colored shirt with a brush of pale hair atop his head. In the first few images the man had a meter-long cannister connected to a strap and hung off one shoulder, perfect for carrying a high-powered military-grade sniper rifle. In the last images, which seemed to have been taken from the same cameras, he was moving in the opposite direction and no longer had the rifle case.

"He must have dropped his weapon in the water," Azlyn said.

Doral nodded. "We're getting a team out there to search, but there's no telling how far currents carried it out before it hit the bottom of the channel."

"What about the man himself?" asked Ganner.

"We pictured him coming from and returning to Cephalia. We have holo-cams placed throughout the central business district and we were able to track him moving through it and into one of the residential districts on the north side of the island."

"How can we track him from there?"

"I've contracted the BSA district office nearby. They're putting the streets on lockdown and canvassing the area for public assistance."

These Bavinyari were taking things seriously. "Once we pinpoint his location we have to move fast. I want him alive, if at all possible."

"We understand." Doral pocketed the projector. "I'm about to go on-site. You're welcome to join me, but I recommend you armor up first. This might get hot."

By the time Ganner and Azlyn had strapped on their red plates, Doral had donned a black plasteel vest and was

joining a heavily armed and armored BSA insertion team. Their black police cruiser shot into the air and raced over Cephalia's stone-and-glass cityscape, weaving nimbly between skyscrapers as it made its way to the residential area on the island's northern slope. Peering through the porthole windows, Ganner saw a half-dozen more boxy airspeeders circling the sky like predatory birds. He doubted the people of Cephalia had seen a manhunt like this before.

Doral's speeder joined the circle as the police chief commed someone dirtside. Ganner's left leg twitched up and down as mounting tension filled his body. Antares' killer might be in their hands within minutes and he wanted nothing more than to tackle the man himself and beat truth out of him with his fists.

Azlyn placed a hand on his bouncing thigh, stilling it. Quietly she said, "Stay calm. Get your head clear."

He was surprised to be admonished. He'd always tried to draw on the Force for guidance, and in many hard situations he'd been the one to lecture Antares on the need for calm. He'd done the same to Azlyn more than once. Without the Force to hold him together, Ganner felt like pieces of him were coming apart.

When Doral finished his call to the ground the speeder veered hard left and began dropping altitude. The chief told his passengers, "We have eyewitness reports of the man we're looking for at a rent-house. Stand by to deploy. Surround the building and cover all exits. Do not engage until I give the order."

As he said the last bit his eyes met Ganner's. The other man simply held them.

The speeder's drop accelerated and Ganner's gut lurched before they hit the ground. As soon as they did the cruiser's side doors slid open and the BSA strike team piled out with military precision. Ganner and Azlyn followed, each carrying a standard-issue blaster rifle. They still kept lightsabers at their belts but the things felt like useless decorations.

The building they surrounded was a three-storey permacrete block, drab and slightly run-down. A sign on one side advertised cheap temporary rents, and as he followed Doral, Ganner's mind did quick calculations. If the gunman was

using a place like this he probably wasn't local. Maybe he'd come from another island just to get a shot at Marasiah. Maybe he'd come from another planet entirely.

Two more police cruisers set down on the lots surrounding the motel. More armored police piled out and had the entire place encircled within a minute. More patrolled the skies, probably watching for runners, but the surrounding streets looked deserted. The neighborhood's civilians were probably laying low and waiting for it to be over.

Ganner and Azlyn crouched beside Doral, who'd taken cover behind a parked landspeeder. Dampness gleamed on the police chief's scalp and Ganner realized he, too, was sweating under his sun-hot armor. They peeked their heads over the speeder's front hood and scanned the windows to the motel, all closed.

"Do we know which one he's in?" asked Azlyn.

"The owner says second floor, northwest corner."

Doral jabbed a finger at one set of windows. The curtains were drawn tight and Ganner could see no motion behind them. If he had the Force he might be able to sense if the room was occupied, and even the occupier's intent. Instead he asked, "When do we go in?"

Doral glanced back at him. "I'm sending in one team to clear the building first. I recommend you stay back, Master Krieg."

He opened his mouth to object but Azlyn said, "We understand, Chief. Are you ready to move?"

In response Doral took out his comlink, called his men, and requested confirmation they had all exits secured. One lieutenant after another replied affirmative until Doral whispered, "Aurek Team, go."

Once again, the Bavinyari impressed. A full dozen armored police charged the hotel's front doors, which slid open to accommodate. At the same time two more cops fired projectiles from shoulder-mounted launchers that smashed through the windows of the northwest room and began filling it with smoke.

And then, for a few excruciating minutes, nothing happened. Vapors furled slowly out of the broken windows but no one on the outside moved, and no laser blasts sounded from

inside. Ganner saw no flashes of light, no signs of activity. He wanted nothing more than to rush inside himself, but he remained crouched behind the landspeeder hood, hands curled to fists, heart pounding in the silence.

Then, finally, Doral's comm buzzed. "Report," the chief said.

Ganner could barely hear the reply: "Building is secure. No shots fired. Suspect is down. Repeat, suspect is down."

"Understood. We're coming in." Doral pocketed the comm and told the two Knights, "Stay with me."

Doral walked into the motel with hands open at his sides, but Ganner kept his rifle up just in case. The building's interior was only slightly less shabby than its outside, and a handful of police were waiting in the lobby.

"Let me see the body," Doral told one lieutenant, who quickly guided them up a flight of stairs to the second level. They filed down the narrow hall, past closed-tight doors until they reached the open one at the end.

The air was thick with residual gas and Ganner put a hand over his mouth and nose to keep from getting dazed. Three more police were standing in the middle of the room, facing the bed. There was a body sprawled there, feet dangling off the edge, chest arced toward the ceiling. The face, topped by a blonde fringe, was recognizable from the security cameras, as were the clothes. The blaster bolt had gone in through bottom of the jaw and exited through the back of the head, and the pistol used seemed to have tumbled from a limp hand off the bed and onto the floor.

It was a grim scene, but not surprising. What Ganner noticed next was. Red paint had been splashed across the room's longest wall, messily conveying the assassin's final message. The words DEATH TO ALL TYRANTS! sat beside the hastily-scrawled but unmistakable phoenix emblem of the Galactic Alliance.

Chapter Twelve

The Woxu homestead on Breshig was a slice of even plain about ten square kilometers in size, with a small residential cluster sitting islanded by grainfields. A series of ridges bounded the property on the eastern side, and after scanning the area from orbit it became clear that the nearby mountain valley was the only place where they could set down and approach Woxu without giving themselves away.

Ania's mother had yet to explain why they needed to sneak up on Woxu or what they'd do once they'd found him. She didn't like that, and she didn't like anything else about this. She was especially disturbed watching Marin and Liem suit up in *Free Agent*'s hold. Those crates they'd loaded onto AG-37's freighter contained two full sets of *beskar* plating, and it was disconcerting to see her mother disappear bit by bit until she was sheathed from neck down in red Mandalorian armor. She had a red T-visor helmet too, but as yet kept it tucked underarm so her face was visible.

It was her first time seeing her mother like that, and it felt wrong. She was a woman well into her sixties, trim and healthy for her age but her face was still lined and her hair frazzled gray. War-plating looked unnatural on her in a way it didn't on young, sharp-eyed Liem.

"If I'd known you two were going in like this I'd have insisted you take more friends," Ania said as she, Sauk, and AG-37 watched the Mandalorians finished getting dressed.

"Two is all we'll need," Liem said with one of his white winning smiles.

“You don’t even know what’s waiting for you. Listen, I’ll grab a blaster and come with you-”

“No,” Marin said immediately. It was no surprise but still disappointing.

“I can take care of myself. I don’t need fancy armor.” Ania looked to Sauk. “Tell ‘em about that time I killed Darth Wredd.”

“Well, you-”

“It’s not about that.” Marin slapped the dome of her helmet. “We’re doing this anonymously. Someone might spot you and even know who you are. We can’t have that.”

“Okay,” Ania put hands on her hips. “Take A-gee along. They wouldn’t know him from any other assassin droid, right?”

Marin looked uncomfortably at AG-37. It had been presumptuous for Ania to speak for him but the droid made no objection. Finally the older woman said, “Okay, but you’ll stay back to cover us, understand? Liem and I will handle infiltration.”

“I understand very well,” AG-37 said. “Let me retrieve my weapons.”

As the droid stomped off to get supplies, Marin looked to her daughter and Sauk. “Keep your comm lines open. I don’t expect we’ll need fast evac, but be ready just in case.”

That hardly made Ania feel better. “Sure,” she said. “I’ll stay right here.” Like a good little girl, she thought sourly.

Hardly for the first time, she wished Jao were here. She hadn’t told him much about her predicament with her mother over the comm- too awkward- but he had a way of cutting through problems and seeing ways out of dilemmas that eluded her. At the same time, when the big important choices had to be made, they’d always been in accord.

It was what had made them a good team once, but no more. One day, she hoped, they could be again.

Once they’d both gotten their considerable problems sorted out.

Marin hardly felt good about leaving her daughter behind, and worse still about the discontented frown on her face when she’d wished them luck. If Ania knew what she was

going to do with Woxu the disapproval would run even deeper, so she'd made the best choice available.

They'd set down on Breshig an hour before drawn crept onto the Woxu homestead. Once they descended from the hill there was no place to hide except for the two-meter grain stalks, which were more effective at hiding Marin and Liem than AG-37. The assassin droid angled his entire torso until it was nearly perpendicular to the ground and charged through the field with his pointed head aimed forward like a battering ram. For humans his speed was just as impossible as his posture, and Marin and Liem hurried to keep close with him. By the time they got within clear visual range of Woxu's home Marin was panting for breath. Even young Liem was winded.

AG-37, who'd retracted most of his metal legs into his abdomen to hide his tall head, swung both photoreceptors on the humans. "I apologize if I was overly hasty. I assumed you wanted to get to Woxu while there was still cover of darkness."

Breathing hard inside her helmet, Marin looked at the sky. Night-black had faded to deep blues that would soon give way to daylight. "You made the right choice, A-gee. Just give me a minute."

"You insisted that I stay in the fields to cover you, correct?"

"That's right," said Liem. "I don't expect to get in trouble, but if we do, I'll hail you. Understand?"

"Very." Both halves of the droid's head rotated so twin photoreceptors faced Marin. "May the Force be with you, Marin Solo."

She stared at that inhuman face, uncertain what to say. She gave the droid a curt nod, then pushed through the remaining grass toward the house.

Marin and Liem emerged from the fields on the house's eastern flank. The entrance was to the south and they split up to curve around the west and north sides. She counted windows, imagined rooms, and gave herself a good guess of the interior layout. It was a simple two-storey home, which probably meant bedrooms in the upper level, kitchen and living areas beneath.

That probably meant Woxu had a family with him. That could make things complicated. She dropped to one knee beside Liem and asked, "Any movement?"

"Negative. Doesn't look like much of a lock on that front door. Want to try for silent entry?"

"Yes. You go up top. I'll clear the lower level quickly and join you."

"Copy that, *ba'vodu*. Ready to go?"

"*Oya*," she whispered, without any of the enthusiasm that usually accompanied the war cry.

Liem made a crouching sprint for the entrance. Marin followed. By the time she reached him he'd already gotten out a knife and started to jimmy open the primitive wooden door. He pried open the lock as quietly as he could and pushed the door open on its hinges, then pocketed the knife, grabbed his blaster pistol, and slipped inside.

Marin followed, her own pistol drawn and readied. They moved as quietly as their hard boots and armored bodies would allow; Liem stalked up the central stairwell while she circled around the lower floors, going through the kitchen, the dining room, and living room. She checked the refresher too, and when she was certain everything was clear she followed Liem upstairs.

She found him standing before cracked-open door, pistol halfway lowered. He stepped aside so Marin could look in and see a pair of bunk beds. She counted at least three small bodies tangled among the sheets, fast asleep.

When she looked back at Liem he jabbed a thumb over-shoulder to the door at the opposite end of the hall. Then he held up two fingers and tapped them on the dome of his helmet. Woxu was in his bedroom with his wife.

Still silent, Marin gestured for him to cover Woxu's bedroom while she handled the kids. As she peered at the bunkbeds again she felt something swim in her stomach. Better small children than adults who could fight, she thought, but it didn't make the next part easier. She double-checked that her blaster was set to STUN, then looked back at the far door. Liem was ready, waiting on her.

Marin shouldered through the doorway and into the bedroom. Three stun blasts in rapid succession took the

children in their beds. At the same time she heard one stun blast from the other side of the house. As she checked the fourth bed- empty and not made up for use- she heard a truncated shout and the sound of struggle. Weapon in hand she raced out down the hall to Woxu's room and saw Liem already on the bed, straddling a middle-aged man and trying to pin him down.

Marin circled around to the side of the bed and shoved her pistol in Woxu's face. It surprised the man so much Liem was able to grab him by both wrists and hold him steady. Woxu's wife, stunned and inert, lay beside them as though obliviously asleep.

"Who are you people?" Woxu groaned as he struggled vainly against the armored figure above him. "What do you want?"

"*Udesii*, we don't want to hurt you," said Liem.

"My family, what did you do to my-"

"They're not harmed," Marin said. "We just want to talk."

"Talk? You broke into my *shabla* house and-"

"What would you say if we told Yaga Auchs sent us?"

Woxu froze. "My business with Auchs is a long time over."

"Is that why you moved out here?" asked Liem.

"That's right."

"Didn't have anything to do with Govum Haugh and Bovar Shal ending up dead, did it?"

"No. It didn't."

Marin could tell he was lying. She nudged his mind with the Force, instilling him with extra fear. "Why'd Auchs kill Haugh and Shal?"

"You... You just said Auchs sent you."

"No, I didn't." Marin nudged him again. "Why did Haugh and Shal end up dead? What does it have to do with the time you three all went missing thirteen years ago?"

Woxu's eyes blinked in confusion. "I... I don't know what you're on about."

"Think back," Liem said. "You used to be a big deal on Mandalore. Might've gotten in Auchs' way when he replaced Chernan Ordo. Why'd you stand down?"

“Stand down? I didn’t.... I don’t kow what you’re talking about...”

“Sure you do, *ner vod*,” Liem growled. “Think real hard.”

Liem thought he was faking. Marin, reading his surface thoughts in the Force, knew it was more complicated. Back when Woxu, Shal, and Haugh, among others, had suddenly changed their mind about supporting Auchs, Marin and two Imperial Knights had been there to investigate. The elder Knight, Eshkar Niin, had paid a visit to Woxu and Shal both. He’d reported that their memories of the kidnappings had been totally erased, likely with the Force.

She saw now it wasn’t wholly true. Images clashed inside his head: dark bodies moving around in the night, an alien face in gold and black, the blank interior walls of a warehouse. His kidnapping and reprogramming had been repressed in memory but not erased. Shards merged like pieces of shattered glass not swept clear.

Maybe the Sith-installed mental blocks decayed in time. Maybe Haugh and Shal had been killed because they’d started to remember what had happened to them. Woxu, sensing some of it but not all, had fled his disjointed memories to Breshig and taken his family with him. For that reason, perhaps, he’d been spared.

Marin reached out with her free hand and placed it on Woxu’s forehead. The man yelped, “Hey! What are you doing?”

“It’s all right,” she said soothingly. “I’ll remember for you.”

Marin had never been skilled at mnemotherapy during her time as a Jedi. They’d stressed that it was only to be used on willing patients to soothe traumatized minds, but that was hardly what she used it for now. She’d barely remembered, re-taught herself, then honed through trial and error since taking up the Force again. Because it was useful she’d gotten good at it, and she pried easily into his mind with invisible fingers.

She touched scattered memories and tried to grab hold. It wasn’t just images anymore, it was smells and sounds. Most of all it was the raw terror and confusion that had filled Woxu at the time. Those feelings entered into her as easily as

she'd entered into him and she struggled to keep them from unnerving her. She grasped hold of one memory: a helmeted figure leaning close, emanated ill will even through its mirror-black visor. Looming on either side was a fearsome figure: one humanoid in black and white, one tall alien in black and gold. The Mandalorian stepped back so the two Sith could move forward.

Woxu's mind revolted at what came next. It pushed back so hard that Marin nearly lost her place inside him. She'd tried to absorb his memories into hers but he was relieving the trauma; he moaned and tried to pull his head free of her grip. She held on tight, with hand and mind, and pried deeper still, hoping for a glimpse of the face behind the Mandalorian mask.

"*Ba'vodu*," Liem said as Woxu struggled beneath her. "You need to stop."

She didn't stop. She endured the agony Woxu had felt beneath Sith hands, all the while clinging to his blurred vision and the green-and-brown armored figure watching it all from the edges. She needed to see Auch's face beneath the mask it but it wouldn't come, it wouldn't reveal itself no matter how hard she tried.

"*Mar'ika*, stop!"

The second Marin's grip on his mind weakened, she was ejected from it entirely. She stumbled back across the bedroom floor, breathing hard. Liem was still pinning the man to the bed but he no longer struggled. His head rolled from side to side and his eyelids twitched erratically. Woxu was a man stuck in the nightmare Marin had placed him in.

"What did you see in there?" Liem gasped.

Marin closed her shaking hand to a fist. "I was so close. Auch's... He was there. I *saw* him with the Sith." She remembered two figures: black and gold, black and white. "I saw... a Blood Carver. And something else. Maybe... a Nagai?"

Woxu was still trembling in his bed. His teeth clacked nosily together.

"*Shab, ba'vodu*, what did you *do* to him?" asked Liem.

There were no words to really explain it. It had been a brutal violation, and unlike the past times she'd done it,

Woxu seemed trapped inside his recovered memories. A Jedi would have been aghast at a deed like that, as would Ania. A part of Marin was horrified too.

Mostly she was disappointed not to have seen the face of her enemy, the final confirmation of his deed.

Liem put hands on Woxu's shoulders to steady him. "What do we do now?"

She could go back in there and try to re-submerge his memories. It wouldn't be pleasant, but it would be easier for her and Woxu both than what she'd just done. She'd planned to use the Force to erase his memories of this entire evening; if she did everything right he still might wake up in bed beside his wife a few hours from now with a headache and nothing more. Or she may have done more permanent damage on her long quest to set things right.

Marin took a deep breath and reached out again. "I'll do what I can for him," she said. "And then we'll go."

It was an auspicious day on Terminus, though the native inhabitants surely thought otherwise. The battle for the planet had been vicious, but it had largely left the world's surface undamaged. The locals seemed thoroughly cowed by the battle they'd witnessed and had volunteered their spaceports to repair the conquerors' damaged vessels. As a result, hundreds of Nagai and Mandalorian ships had set down on the planet. The Ssi-ruuvi vessels, which would probably confound Terminus' techs, remained in orbit to guard their prized new world.

Though their warships stayed high above, a delegation of the reptilian conquerors had descended to its surface. Rather than parade through any of its cities, which the Nagai were already doing, they landed on a clear plain well outside the capital. It was here that Yaga Auchs landed as well, and as promised, Darth Nihl was waiting for him.

"I'm glad you could come," the Nagai smiled, bearing sharp teeth. "You're in for quite a display."

Despite losing the Force his eyes were still a fierce red, and he retained the jagged tattoos on his face. Yaga remembered when they'd first met all those years ago on Mandalore, where Nihl had helped dispose of the new

Mand'alor's enemies. He'd lacked the black-stained jaw but still had the intense gaze, the long black hair, the lean muscular body. He'd accompanied another Sith, that one a towering Blood Carver with three-jointed limbs and skin decorated black and gold. Yaga had realized then that he was a partner to monsters.

After thirteen years that seemed truer than ever. Dozens of Ssi-ruuk had gathered at the center of the field and moved as a tight-packed multi-colored mass. They seemed to be swarming in concentric circles, though Yaga couldn't see what lay at the center. Their powerful bodies stretched over three meters from the ends of their snouts to the tips of their thick tails, and they moved swiftly on three-clawed feet with small forelimbs tucked beneath their trunks. As they moved they released a cacophony of whistles and fluting sounds, and Yaga couldn't tell if they were speaking or singing.

Nihl stepped beside him. "The Ssi-ruuvi society is caste-based. Those you see with red scales are the warriors. Of course they're the most present here, but you'll also see blue-scaled administrators and yellow-scaled scientists. Look closely and you'll even spot a few brown-scaled P'w'eck from Bakura, come to join the holy crusade."

Yaga saw all those things but understood nothing. He wasn't sure he wanted to understand what kind of creatures he'd unknowingly made pact with.

Clearly, Nihl had called him here for an education, so he asked, "What are they doing here? This looks like some kind of... ceremony."

"Precisely. The Ssi-ruuk, you see, have an absolute terror of dying away from worlds they haven't consecrated as holy. Their fear their souls will spend eternity wandering the blackness of space."

It was an unpleasant concept. Yaga was glad to believe in nothing more than the *Manda'yaim*, a vague continuity of Mandalorian culture passed through generations. Death-after-life was an *arueti* concept, one most Mandos didn't favor, especially since it usually promised punishment for past sins.

"This religion presents a problem," Nihl went on. "The Ssi-ruuk are predators by birth, expansionists at heart. Yet

they're afraid to go to worlds they haven't already conquered. Hence their reliance on droids."

"I've heard they... fuel their machines with life energy from slaves." He had no idea how it worked, nor did he want to.

"They've been having difficulties with entechment recently," the Nagai said as the reptiles whirled in faster and faster circles. "I arranged for them to be supplied with droid brains from Geonosis. I also promised them all of the planets we've already conquered, as a sign of good faith." He smiled again. "This ceremony is being repeated on a dozen worlds as we speak."

Yaga watched as the swirling mass of Ssi-ruuk cried louder and louder, until their chaotic wailing stabbed at his head. To shove his helmet on or cover his ears would be a show of weakness, so he ground his teeth and withstood the aliens' horrible noises until they suddenly stopped their whirling. Still keeping in circles of blue, red, yellow, and brown, they all stepped back, loosening formation so Yaga could see the giant gold-scaled alien at the center of the whorl. He watched as the creature stood high on its haunches and wailed, throwing open its spindly arms as if to embrace the blue sky, this whole new world.

When it finished, the surrounding Ssi-ruuk threw back their heads and joined in. Then they began running circles again, but this time they moved slower and less frantically. Yaga understood somehow that this was a procession of triumph.

"The ceremony... is it complete?"

"Yes," Nihl nodded. "Terminus is now consecrated as a holy world of the Ssi-Ruuvi Imperium."

"What about the people who already live here?"

"As long as they continue to repair our ships- and build new ones when necessary- they won't be treated too harshly."

"Do the Ssi-ruuk understand that?"

"They're more perceptive than you think. They understand that the old ways no longer work. Bold, creative thinking is required to thrive in the galaxy today."

He sounded like a man congratulating himself. Yaga didn't begrudge him, not really. As an act of scripted drama, the

Second Battle of Terminus had been masterful. “Coruscant has to react to this, and strongly.”

“Coruscant has other problems to deal with. They won’t ignore us... but I doubt their next response will be as coordinated as it was today.”

Yaga had no idea what that meant, but after today he’d stopped doubting the Sith’s abilities. Even without the Force he was something to be reckoned with.

“You have impressive allies,” he told Nihl. “Do you still need the Mandalorians?”

Yaga’s father hadn’t raised him to run from fights, but he hoped the answer would be *no*. Of course, the Sith wouldn’t throw away good tools so easily.

Nihl crossed his arms and said, “I understand your fighting fleet is limited compared to what the Ssi-ruuk can field, but there’s a place for you in the new empire we’re carving. The Ssi-ruuk will never land ground troops on an unconsecrated planet, and while we Nagai are excellent melee fighters, Mandalorian supercommandos bring a special touch.”

“We still need to be paid for our work.”

“I’m sure a planet like Terminus has plenty of bullion stashed away. You’re welcome to it.”

“We’re not just going to pillage our way through the Outer Rim. I want a contract.”

Nihl didn’t seem put-off by his impudence. “You’ll get one before our next operation. Be patient.”

“Where are we going after this?”

“That’s to be decided.” Nihl tilted his head skyward. “Go back to your ships. Congratulate your warriors on a job well done. Encourage them to rest and enjoy their spoils before going back to fighting.”

A lot of his soldiers would enjoy that, but plenty would also want to know what came next. The decision to join the Nagai in their Outer Rim conquests had struck many Mandos as a full reversal from Yaga’s normal policies as *Mand’alor*. Even Chernan Ordo would have balked at such adventurism, they were saying. It was more like something his long-dead uncle would have done. Being loyal servant to the Sith had gotten Gevern killed. Yaga was determined to avoid that end, even if he couldn’t yet see a way out.

"I'm going to ask this plainly." He paused a second, waiting for an objection that didn't come. "Where does it stop? How far do you think you can get with this little... 'empire' of yours? You may grab some sectors, but eventually you'll run out of soldiers and resources. You'll be spread too thin to hold your territory and the Federation, no matter how messed-up it is, will start taking planets back."

"I think you'd be surprised by how much territory we can take, especially once word spreads that we're charitable in victory."

"That's not an answer."

"Be patient and you'll see what I can do," Nihl said firmly. "I promise you."

And the Sith, he knew, really did keep their promises.

When Yaga left the site of the ceremony he rode his shuttle back up to his flagship, which had endured the fighting with only minor damage. The *Teroch*-class frigate looked miniscule drifting beside a massive Ssi-ruuvi battle cruiser, and when he convened his lieutenants he made the mistake of doing so in a cabin that looked out on the alien vessel.

Yaga spoke loud and clear to draw their eyes away from the distracting ship. "The Nagai want us here for the duration," he explained. He refrained from using Nihl's name and title; the less who knew he was in bed with the Sith, the better. "They say to rest and patch up for now, but be ready for further action. Specifically, get ready for ground-pounding."

His lieutenants, most still in *beskar*, nodded. Some were more pleased than others, he knew. Thorum Rhal, sick of lying low after being nearly nabbed on Ord Mantell, was ready for more bruising. Vaun Zerimar, more cautious, asked, "Do we need to bring more troops from Mandalore?"

"I don't expect operations to either expand or contract just yet. We hold here, resupply, and get ready."

"And what about our new soul-sucking lizard friends?" She glanced out the window.

"Apparently souls are off the menu. Don't ask me to explain, I just know those tiny deadly fighters are being flown by droid brains from Geonosis now."

His lieutenants exchanged looks. Most seemed mildly relieved to know they weren't in danger of having their life

forces sucked into machines. For that, Yaga didn't blame them at all.

Rhal asked, "Any idea what the next target is?"

"No. I think our client's been stirring up trouble on Coruscant and wants to see how that plays out."

"Heard someone almost killed the empress," another lieutenant said.

That explained Nihl's confident smile. "The Nagai are playing classic divide-and-conquer. I think they're going to keep going as far as they can."

"And how far do *we* go?" asked Zerimar.

Rhal gave her unexpected support. "When the going gets tough we can run back to Mandalore, no problem. I got a feeling the Nagai and Ssi-ruuk can handle themselves pretty well even without us."

The others nodded agreement. Apparently they thought it would be that easy.

"That's enough for today," Yaga said. "You're all dismissed. Go down to Terminus, check on your ships and people, and have a little fun while you can. We'll be fighting soon enough."

The last part stirred Rhal. He punched a fist against his chest plate and shouted, "*Oya Mando!*"

Several others repeated the battle cry, then filed out of the room. Soon it was empty of everyone except Yaga and his daughter, who'd been watching silently from the back corner. She pushed off from the wall and walked toward her father, flexing shoulders beneath her dark armor.

"Did you talk to a Sith down there, *buir*?"

"Darth Nihl himself. Got to watch our new lizard friends consecrate Terminus as holy ground."

Sora let her gaze turn toward the massive ship drift alongside theirs. "You really didn't know about them?"

"Not until they popped out in the middle of the drag field. Apparently they hijacked some Bakuran tech for that." He looked at her face and saw the bags under her eyes. "How was it in your Beskad?"

"We can handle TIE fighters. And Alliance snubs. Those Ssi-ruuvi droid fighters, though... They are nasty things, *buir*. They're like fleshgnats or piranha beetles. One second you're

flying free and the next they overwhelm you, and they're so slippery your targeting computers can't even get a lock."

"Did any of them fire on our Beskads?"

"No. I guess their IFF software is on-point, but they didn't move out of way when we got close. And the way they tore up the Alliance fighters is gonna give my pilots nightmares." Sora forced her eyes off the alien cruiser. "Lucky they're on our side, I guess."

"Very lucky. And we'll keep it that way as long as we have to."

"Does Nihl really think he came make this last?"

"He seems confident."

"But what does he think he's doing? Is he trying to rebuild Krayt's *shabla* Sith Empire here on the Outer Rim? How can that even work without the Force?"

"I have no idea." Yaga crossed his arms. "But for now, while he's riding high, we ride with him."

"And when he's not?" When her father didn't answer right away, Sora asked, "How many Sith are there? Do you know?"

"No. And I get the impression he's spread them all throughout the Nagai fleet, probably in command positions."

She sighed. "Then I guess we can't get 'em all on one ship and blow 'em up."

"Afraid not, *Sor'ika*. But I like the creative thinking."

She smiled weakly and looked back at the passing Ssi-ruuvi ship. The cruiser had just passed in front of the Terminus system's primary, eclipsing the Mandalorian frigate within its shadow. That was too much symbolism for Yaga's liking and he led Sora out of the room and into the hallway beyond, where at least he could forget about it for a while.

The clearer the situation offworld got, the more dangerous and confused the situation on Bakura became. Reports from Coruscant confirmed what had been unthinkable days before: the Ssi-ruuk had allied with the Nagai and Mandalorians to wage a war of pure conquest across a nearby slice of the Outer Rim. That alone cast the Ssi-ruuk's actions here in a new and disingenuous light, but the truly damning news was

that the Ssi-ruuk warships at Terminus seemed to have been equipped with devices to counter interdiction fields, devices that behaved exactly like Bakuran-made HIMS.

The reaction of Bakura's human population had been swift and violent. Mobs had attacked the P'w'eck clusters in Salis D'aar and the other cities. President Recado ordered a planet-wide curfew and ordered the Bakuran Defense Forces to keep the peace in the cities. Rumors about P'w'eck collaboration with the Ssi-ruuk continued to swirl until most of the populace accepted them as fact.

With violence quelled, Recado did the only thing left: he ordered a meeting with the P'w'eck leader Vlothaw. He invited Shado and Storr to join; it seemed to Shado that the president was so boxed in by the situation that he was looking to Coruscant's representatives as a last chance for salvation. The unspoken need in his eyes weighed heavily on Shado, who now more than ever needed to stop observing and actually *do* something to stop the turmoil. He didn't know *what* he'd do, only that he'd be a poor Jedi if he didn't. And he needed to be a Jedi still.

Despite having neither the Force nor a good grasp of P'w'eck body language, he could tell Vlothaw was just as disturbed as the rest of them. His long brown tail twitched erratically and he kept blinking as he tried to explain himself in long musical wails.

"Legislator, even if you weren't personally working with the Ssi-ruuk behind our backs, some of your people- high-ranked elected P'w'eck, by your own admission- were collaborating with the enemy," Recado said. His anger mixed with weariness but he remained standing behind his desk as he faced off with the taller saurian. "Either you are lying to me or you can't control your own people. Either way you can't expect me to believe that all your people on Bakura now are loyal."

Vlothaw whistled again, and the translator nestled in Shado's ear said, "We are working to identify traitors as we speak."

"Not good enough." Recado placed two fists on the desk. "You're going to hand over all your information and let Bakuran Security detain any suspected traitors."

Vlothaw waved his head, emphatically mimicking the human gesture of denial. "We cannot hand them over to human justice."

"It's not human justice, it's Bakuran's justice. Legislator, you're asking me to trust you when you know damned well that you haven't earned it."

"Your human justice has not earned *our* trust."

Wearily, Recado looked to the Federation ambassadors. Storr said, "Naturally Coruscant is willing to act as arbitrator in any negotiations. Our people are investigating the Ssi-ruuvi offensive now and will share any relevant information they have."

Shado kept quiet, but he knew that was an exaggeration. With Hogrum Chalk at its helm, Federation intelligence was notoriously parsimonious about what it shared, and before this meeting Storr had admitted such information on the Ssi-ruuk was painfully scarce.

Vlothaw piped angrily, "Innocent P'w'eck have been killed. Justice starts with restitution."

"Then I'll authorize creation of an independent tribunal to find and punish those guilty of spreading violence against your people."

Recado glared at Storr, and the ambassador hurried to add, "This tribunal will be overseen by the Federation to make sure it's impartial."

The president asked Vlothaw. "Does that satisfy you?"

Vlothaw's tail thumped the carpet. "It is a start."

"Good. Now I expect cooperation from you. Let my security forces investigate for collaborators with the Ssi-ruuk. With Federation oversight."

The P'w'eck's twitched his head up and down. Shado had no idea how to read the alien gesture, but Vlothaw whistled, "That is acceptable. Once the Federation confirms it will oversee the investigation, we will cooperate."

Shado thought Recado might press for a faster timetable, but the man nodded. Vlothaw slapped his tail on the floor again, turned, and left the room.

When he was gone, the president sunk into his chair and sighed. "Ambassador Storr, get online with Coruscant and light a fire under them. We don't have time to waste."

“I’ll do what I can.”

Recado’s eyes narrowed. “We need Federation promises and we need them *now*.”

“I know, but frankly, Coruscant is something of a mess at the moment. At Bavinyar-”

“I know what happened at Bavinyar. And your empress has my sincerest sympathies. But we need *help* here and if the Federation can’t give it, I don’t know why we joined in the first place. Given the mess the Ssi-ruuk are making in other sectors, you’d think this would be a high priority.”

“I know. And I’ll make your case as fervently as I can. But realistically, this is an extreme situation for us all.”

“I know. But my priority will always be my people.”

Even if Bakura’s gain costs others, Shado knew. When he thought on the president’s belief in Cosmic Balance it seemed, intellectually, like a cruel faith that could be used to justify any selfishness. Yet there was nothing wicked about Recado; he was just a man, old and tired and overwhelmed by a problem with no apparent solution.

The president turned his eyes to Shado. “Do you have any insight, Master Jedi? Any read on Vlothaw?”

Without the Force or familiarity with P’w’eck body language he had none, but Shado said, “I think Vlothaw is just trying to protect his people. He’s scared after what happened.”

“So are the Bakurans. Some P’w’eck passed classified knowledge on HIMS creation to the Ssi-ruuk. They might have even given them the technology straight-up. That’s treason, and even if Vlothaw didn’t do it he’s still culpable for failing to stop it.”

Storr said, “Frankly, Mister President, I think you have to work with Vlothaw right now. Removing him would make the situation even more volatile.”

“Oh, I’m aware. The demon we know and all that.” Recado slumped further. “Now please, get online with your bosses and tell them how desperate we are. Even if Coruscant’s in as big of a mess as Bakura, they’re our only hope.”

Chapter Thirteen

Sebiris was a hot world, its continents covered by dense jungles. The settlement nearest to the hypergate excavation site was located by the equator, and the outside air was so sweltering as to make all but the lightest clothes unbearable. It was no place to sneak around in a black hooded cloak, and for that reason Darth Talon stayed in their ship while Eli went out into the city to see what he could learn.

It was an arrangement that had become almost commonplace since they'd lost the Force. Talon hid her emotions well, but Eli could tell she was frustrated by her limitations. Despite that, she'd given no indication that she'd remove the scarlet-and-black Sith tattoos. It was her show of faith that her powers, and the greatness of the Sith, would one day be restored.

Either that, or she was clinging to them in desperation.

The settlement itself seemed to be thriving. Acres of jungle had been cleared away and hundreds of new buildings had been erected. They were mostly made of metal that gleamed hot and bright in the sun, and Eli sometimes had to squint through the glare as he watched the mélange of beings in its streets. There was a fair amount of offworld aliens but most of the crowd seemed an equal mix of human settlers and native Sebiri, bipedal long-legged saurian with blue scaly hides and short snouts. They seemed better adjusted to the climate the humans, all of whom were visibly sweating under the sun.

He wanted to gather information first, so he started talking. According to the information they'd gathered about Sebiris

en route, the planet had undergone a minor boom based off industrialized agriculture; apparently some of the native plants could be processed into medicines usable by a dozen common species. Eli started off by posing as co-pilot of a freighter looking to ship said medicines to out-of-the-way locations, though in each conversation he'd direct matters to the archaeological excavation site located forty kilometers northwest of the city. Most of those he'd talked to neither knew nor cared about the site, but someone recalled a commotion a little over a year ago. He wasn't sure of the specifics, but it seemed material from the site had been stolen. After further prying, Eli learned that an unusual spacecraft had been seen at the port around that time. Its hull had been smooth and curved, and it had possessed no visible standard engines or weapons. Though nobody he talked to identified it as such, Eli was sure they'd seen Khat Lah's organic Sekotan flyer.

Eli spent nearly two days collection pieces of information until he'd assembled a decent picture of what had happened. He still needed to know the details, and the only place he'd get that was the excavation site itself. He and Talon had discussed different ways for him to insinuate himself at the site, but as a young man, not even twenty years old, he couldn't credibly claim a position of authority. Ultimately he decided to follow along the path he'd already travelled on Mrlsst.

To get to the excavation site, he took the speeder bike carried in the belly of their shuttle. He piloted it away from the town and toward the hypergate, over the tops of trees bursting with long leaves colored equal amounts violet and green. The excavation was visible from a distance as a gaping hole in the treeline.

As Eli slowed his speeder and circled once around the site before landing, he made sure to take in all the details. The hexagonal dome that had protected the hypergate for millennia still stood, though one-third of it had been peeled away and through the gap he could see the ruins of the gate itself rising ten meters high. It looked like a great doorframe, without a door. The dome was surrounded by rings of equipment, several landspeeders, and simple flexfabric tents.

Eli's arrival drew attention. As he set his bike down next to the landspeeders, over a dozen beings converged on him. Most wore beige and dusty clothes, and all looked at him with suspicion. Eli didn't have the Force, but through their faces he could read deeper. Their aversion to outsiders seemed defensive; they were afraid of his exposing something. He also noted the approach of one Cerean, cone-topped head wrapped in a sweaty red bandana. The others were making way for him to approach, typical deference to an authority figure, but there was relief too. They were glad someone else was going to handle this difficult conversation.

There were still many ways Eli could screw this up, especially without the Force, but the Cerean's appearance was a boon. Before leaving Mrlsst he'd made copies of every progress report published and memorized the name of every scientist mentioned inside. There'd been only one Cerean, the lead excavator.

As he got close the Cerean asked, "Can we help you, young man?"

"Doctor Akk-Mor-Baun, it's good to see you," Eli smiled politely and extended a hand. "I'm Orath Panelis."

Akk-Mor-Baun looked at the hand for a moment, confusion temporarily eclipsing hostility. "I'm afraid I haven't heard of you."

Eli wrinkled his face in earnest-seeming confusion. "Are you certain? I'm Doctor Soridus' assistant. He should have sent you a message saying I was coming."

The name of his associate, currently lecturing on Mrlsst, made the Cerean's frown deepen. "I'm afraid I never got that message."

"Maybe there was a communications breakdown. We *are* a long way from Mrlsst and there *has* been nasty fighting going on lately."

"Yes, well, we're just glad it hasn't come here." The Cerean and his assistants still regarded Eli warily. "Can you explain a little of the work you've been doing with Doctor Soridus?"

"Of course," Eli said, and let his eyes drift over to the sliced-open dome and a slim glimpse of the hypergate. Putting on a youthful smile he added, "I can't tell you how

exciting it is to be here, finally. I've heard so much about your work from Doctor Soridus and I'm *so* sorry about what happened last year."

Akk-Morr-Baun grunted. "Yes. Well, that's still a sore subject, but we've been dealing with it the best we can. Again, I'd like to hear more about your work with Soridus, so I can understand better how to, ah, fit you in to our team."

"Oh, of course," Eli kept emulating the guileless enthusiasm he'd seen on all those students at Mrlsst. "But can we get into the shade? I'm, ah, not used to this climate yet."

"It will take some time," Akk-Morr-Baun said, and with the flick of a wrist gestured him toward a tent. "This way, Mister Panelis. I'm eager to hear what you have to say for yourself."

It was no short trip to Sebiris. The violence that was flaring up around this section of the Outer Rim made even Cade wary, and he plotted *Mynock* on a course to stay clear of the conflicted sectors but added another day and a half to their trip. Once they reached the Kathol Sector, the region's infamous spatial distortions made travel slower still.

The one upside was that they had plenty of time to gather information and get prepared. Times like these, it was good to have friends, or at least reliable contacts. Lowbacca talked to the Jedi and Jao to the Imperial Knights, and both came up with the same information about Sebiris. The planet, located on the edge of a strange starless expanse called the Marcol Void, had recently been the site of archaeological investigations by a team of researchers claiming to have found an ancient hypergate.

Cade knew about hypergates, vaguely. Supposedly they'd been able transmit matter instantaneously from one side of the galaxy to another, far faster than any hyperdrive. The long-dead empire of the Gree and Kwa had used them, but they'd been lost long before the Old Republic was born. Most of the people Cade had met dismissed them as weird legends and said they'd probably never existed in the first place, but as a Jedi- the last one left, apparently- he knew the galaxy was full of unlikely truths.

The specifics of the excavation, headed by a team from a university on Mrlsst, were unclear, and both contacts had promised to look into it. Jao's Imp friends got back first, and while *Mynock* skirted the Seswenna sector and vectored up the Rimma Trade Route, a small crowd gathered in its cockpit to listen to the report.

"The specifics are still unclear," began the bearded Knight Yalta Val, efficiently killing hopes before they got too bright. "The university is forestalling questions and wrangling us in bureaucratic barriers."

"You're the government," Cade asked the Knight's head-and-shoulders holo-image. "Can't you cut through all that?"

"We're attempting to," Val said. "But for now, this is what we know. The researchers believe they've uncovered an ancient hypergate that's far better preserved than most of the other ruins across the galaxy. However, excavation slowed considerably about fourteen months ago, for reasons they're not clear on."

"That sounds like around the time Khat Lah went there," Jao said.

"Indeed. From what we *can* tell, the researchers think the hypergate is between forty and fifty thousand years old."

"Well, that narrows it down," Cade muttered. "Any idea who built it?"

"Common supposition is either the Gree or the Kwa. The researchers don't seem to have reached a more specific conclusion."

A Wookiee roar sounded from the back of the cockpit, and C-3PO said, "Master Lowbacca raises a fine point. Our concern should be less about the hypergate than about why Khat Lah would be seeking one."

"You're right, and we *do* know he's been seeking," said Val. "Since the... incident on Te Hasa, the empress has been trying to keep a small but but steady window of communication open with the Gree. We've shared some of our information and they've shared some of theirs, including a list of all registered visitors to Asation within the past three years."

"Reikar Horn?" asked Jao.

Val nodded. "According to Gree authorities, he attempted to examine the Asation hypergate site. The entire region around the gate is forbidden to foreigners, so he was refused access and expelled from Gree space."

A good bit of information, but Cade didn't know what to do with it. "How long ago was this?"

"Approximately sixteen months."

Well before he visited Sebiris, then. Lowbacca roared again and C-3PO said, "You're quite right. Khat Lah has been searching for some time, but we still have no idea why."

Cade asked, "Got anything special to tell us about those hypergates, professor?"

The droid shook slightly, as though surprised by the question. "I'm afraid I have little more to share. As no hypergate has ever been made workable within recorded history, there is little to be said about them besides rumors and suppositions. We do not even know whether a single hypergate linked to one location or many. We also do not know how they are powered, and while there's some suggestion the Force may have been used this is, as I said, unverifiable. According to my internal databases, one such gate was nearly activated on the planet Dathomir several decades before the rise of the Empire, but it has since been totally destroyed and no scientific study was carried out."

Lowbacca roared something else, and the droid added, "Apparently the Jedi records concur on this point."

"So we know next to nothing," summarized Cade. "Great. Anything else about Sebiris?"

"I'm sending a data package attached to this stream," said Val. "It contains the coordinates for the excavation site, and the location of the nearest port city. Sebiris has a mix of native sentients and human immigrants. Their relationship has been contentious at times but seems stable now. We don't think it has anything to do with the troubles at the excavation site."

"It looks like those troubles come down to our rogue Yuuzhan Vong," Jao said. "Thank you for your help, Master Val. We'll keep you informed on what we find at Sebiris."

"You're welcome, Jao. May the Force be with you all."

The holo shut off, and Cade sensed Jao and Lowbacca both discomfited by the salutation. Rather than let them indulge in self-pity, Cade said, "Okay, let's brainstorm. Khat Lah's got a hankering for hypergates. Why? What does he expect to get from one that he can't get from a ship with hyperdrive?"

Neither Jao nor Lowbacca offered a suggestion, but C-3PO said, "Perhaps he believes a hypergate can lead him to Mortis, or one of the others monoliths."

The thought had occurred to Cade; early in their mission they'd visited the supposed sites of two Force-powerful worlds enclosed within gigantic eight-sided artificial monoliths of Celestial construct. One monolith had been found in the Chiloan Rift a century earlier; the other, called Mortis in legend, had been rediscovered in Wild Space by a team of Jedi Quest Knights searching for a weapon to use against the Force abomination Abeloth. The Jedi Order had recorded spatial coordinates for both monoliths, but when *Mynock* had searched those locations they'd found nothing.

"It could make sense," Cade muttered, but his gut told him Khat Lah was after something else. Details on Mortis were shaky, but supposedly the world had once been dwelling place for three super-powerful Force entities- possibly former Celestials- called the Ones which had maintained balance in the Force. The Ones had died almost two centuries ago after Cade's ancestor Anakin Skywalker had refused to replace them. Cade had had the opportunity to read the reports from the Quest Knights who'd rediscovered Mortis, and according to them the great Force power that had once possessed the world was gone, leaving a desolate and dying planet behind.

He doubted Khat Lah was after Mortis. What he *was* after was anyone's guess.

Softly, Lowbacca groaned. C-3PO said, "Quite right, Master. Whatever the truth is, we must wait for it to present itself."

"If it presents itself," Jao muttered, and nobody argued.

To Eli's mild surprise and great satisfaction, his scraped-together plan to infiltrate the excavation site worked. It would have gone far smoother if he'd had the Force to

compel his will on Akk-Morr-Baun and the other archaeologists, but he dropped just enough names and fact gleaned from the journal reports to pass himself off as an actual researcher from Mrlsst. The illusion wouldn't last long, but Eli hadn't planned to stay; he'd told the researchers that he'd left most of his personal things at an inn back in the city and would have to retrieve them before nightfall.

That still gave him most of a day, and in the first few hours alone he learned what he needed to. By giving Akk-Morr-Baun the impression that he already knew all about Khat Lah's actions a year ago, he lulled the researchers into false security and got the Cerean to let slip critical details. The full extent of Khat Lah's theft remained unpublicized; if word got out it would be an embarrassment for the university and might well cost them their funding. Thus the excavation project trudged along, quietly downplaying initial expectations and scraping for whatever the thieves had left.

The research team's early enthusiasm, apparent even through the dry academic language of those progress reports, had been well-founded. The hypergate inside the dome had been untouched for tens of thousands of years, preserved even from the weather. The technology inside was unlike anything used currently in the galaxy save by the Gree, whom Akk-Morr-Baun had studied for years. He and his research team had begun cataloging and analyzing the gate's parts in the hopes of returning power to the device and using it once more.

They'd been making progress when Khat Lah arrived. In the guise of Reikar Horn he'd come with a team of a dozen human researchers who must have been masqueraded Yuuzhan Vong. Akk-Morr-Baun and the other archaeologists had been extremely hesitant to let him look at the site, especially when they learned he wasn't accredited at any university or research institute. They'd reluctantly put aside their suspicions when Khat Lah had presented them with information and recovered artifacts from a trip to the planet Tython, in the Deep Core.

Encouraged by his knowledge, they'd started sharing their research and allowed his team access to the hypergate. After that, a dozen more armed men showed up at the camp, held

the researchers captive, and helped Khat Lah's people strip critical systems from the hypergate and move them to the Sekotan flyer.

"I heard about all that from Doctor Soridus," Eli lied as he and Akk-Morr-Baun stood inside the shaded dome, looking up at the cyclopean pillars that held up the gate's hollow frame. "But are you really sure he came from Tython? I've heard the planet's location is lost."

"Doctor Relno is our expert on Jedi artifacts," the Cerean said, naming a researcher Eli'd been briefly introduced to. "The devices Horn procured predate the First Schism between the Jedi and the Sith. They were truly ancient... and they didn't *seem* to be forgeries."

"Did something on Tython point him here?" asked Eli. He'd never get Khat Lah's current location from these researchers, but he might be able learn why he'd stolen pieces of the hypergate.

"He didn't say, exactly," Akk-Morr-Baun, "But he said he'd found the ruins of another hypergate on Tython. He even showed us some maps of the site."

"Do you have those maps?"

"No. He took them with him," the Cerean said sourly, remembering what else Khat Lah had taken. "He didn't say how he'd gotten to Tython either. This Reikar Horn... he seems to be some sort of rogue xenoarchaeologist, like the kind they make holo-dramas about. I've had people at the university look into his identity. I suspect his name was a fake. A decade ago there was a Jedi named Reikar Horn who was killed at Duro. That seems... more than a coincidence."

Maybe Eli should have made a comment about that; instead he changed the subject. "Did he say how he *got* to Tython? It's supposed to be impossible."

"No, he was quite tight-lipped about that," the Cerean shook his head, but Eli had an idea. If anyone knew the location of the ancient planet, rumored to be the birthplace of the Jedi Order, it would have been the Jedi themselves. K'Kruhk could have easily given Khat Lah the information at the start of his wandering.

Tython certainly made sense as a destination, and not just because of its place in Jedi lore. On the way to Sebiris, Eli

had reviewed the Gree index of hypergate locations. Sebiris had been among them, as had Tython. The list included galactic-standard spatial coordinates for those gates, but the coordinates themselves seemed to have been derived from Gree maps many of millennia old. That didn't matter so much for Outer Rim worlds like Sebiris, which rotated very slowly around the galactic center, but those coordinates were essentially useless in the Deep Core, where stars were packed tight and moved quickly by comparison. Still, all the information Eli had gathered seemed to be pointing in one direction. That was encouraging, even if he couldn't see the destination itself.

The sun was going down in the sky when Akk-Morr-Baun finished giving Eli his tour of the site. After that Eli excused himself to go back to the city and retrieve his things from the inn. He parted with the researchers on much better terms than he'd arrived, though he still felt reticence from some; they'd already been burned badly by strangers showing up unannounced.

None of that mattered. Eli had learned what he could on Sebiris and they had a place to go next, assuming they could find it. He explained all this to Darth Talon once he returned to their ship, safely and inconspicuously docked at the spaceport.

The Twi'lek took it all in thoughtfully. "Under Lord Krayt we maintained a presence in the Deep Core," she said. "We've since... withdrawn, but our maps remain."

"Do you mean we have a route to Tython?"

"I don't know," Talon said crisply. "I will have to consult with Lord Nihl."

I Eli noticed, not *we*, even after he'd done all the work on Sebiris. He asked a little sourly, "Is there anything else to do here?"

"From what you've told me, no. Are you sure in your judgement?"

She looked at him hard; since losing the Force her eyes had turned to a deep ocean-blue, incongruous against the harsh red and black of her face. Right now that made her glare more intimidating. "I don't see any reason to stay," he said.

“Very well. Prepare the ship for takeoff. I will inform Lord Nihl of our progress.”

When Nihl received the hail from Darth Talon, he was aboard his flagship and preparing invasion plans for the Stensen sector. He considered ignoring her signal, but ultimately summoned her blue holo-image in the center of his command salon. He hoped the conversation would be brief.

“Greetings, Lord Nihl,” the Twi’lek tipped her head in a slight bow. “We have alighted from Sebiris.”

She’d already briefed him on the purpose of her mission there. “You know where your quarry went next?”

“No, Lord. However, we believe we know where he was *before* Sebiris.”

Nihl felt an involuntary stab of pity for Talon. To go from Krayt’s trusted Hand to a hapless errand girl was humiliating indeed, but after failing to secure Darth Maladi and a cure for their disease, it was the least she deserved. Stifling any empathy he asked, “Where was he before?”

Talon lifted her head slightly. “Tython, my lord.”

Nihl blinked. “Tython? Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes, lord. I’m unaware of how to reach Tython. I was hoping you could provide a route.”

Routes through the Deep Core’s convoluted, ever-shifting starlanes had been one of the One Sith’s most guarded secrets. For years it had been kept in the hands of the traitor Wyyrlokk, but Nihl had inherited that information. “We know of a route to Tython,” he said, “But it is several years out of date. Likely it’s reliable... but you should proceed with caution.”

“Very good, lord.”

When she volunteered nothing else he asked, “What precisely did you find on Sebiris?”

“A hypergate, lord, and one in better condition than anywhere else in the known galaxy.” She stopped, then amended, “It *was* in good condition, but Khat Lah and his allies stole parts from it.”

While he’d never invested much hope in the search for one errant, Force-using Vong, Nihl considered the puzzle. “If he

stole parts from the Sebiris hypergate, it stands to reason he plans to use them to rebuild *another* hypergate.”

“Perhaps on Tython,” Talon said. “Apparently Khat Lah mentioned he’d found the ruins of one there.”

“To the archaeologists on Sebiris?”

“That’s right.”

“Then it seems you have a lead worth pursuing. I’ll send you a map to Tython shortly.”

“Excellent, lord. I have one other request.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve told you that Cade Skywalker is also searching for Khat Lah. His resourcefulness is not to be underestimated.”

Nihl felt a phantom throb in his implanted arm, the replacement for the one Skywalker had taken. “I don’t need reminding. What does that have to do with Sebiris? Has he been there?”

“No. The archaeologists Eli talked to made no mention of him, but he might still come. We need to make sure he doesn’t find the same clues we did.”

“Speak plainly. If you want to destroy the hypergate and everyone there, your ship has the weapons to do so.”

“Targeting the hypergate alone would be too obvious. The Kathol sector isn’t far from your current campaigns.”

Nihl’s lips pressed tight. His nearest battle group was several sectors away, though to reach Kathol they’d merely need to skirt around the edge of the galaxy’s disk, far from most inhabited systems. Still, the war was in a careful stage, and he was loathe to spare a fleet when the Federation was mounting its counterattack.

Sensing his hesitation, Talon pressed, “Please, consider. Raid Sebiris and a few other worlds in the Kathol sector. They have no defenses. It will be a clear slaughter and will spread fear further.”

“Fear is good,” said Nihl, “A coherent offensive is better.”

“One battle group will suffice. Besides the hypergate, they can raze the jungle and bomb the surrounding town. It will only take an hour, maybe two.”

“And days to get there.”

“One battle group, Lord. That’s all I ask. Then we won’t have to worry about Skywalker following us to Tython.”

“Unless he finds his own way. Unless he’s already there.”

Talon acknowledged his point with a single nod.

And yet, Nihl thought, spreading fear would be a valuable gain from an excursion to Kathol. More worlds would feel unsafe and clamor for Federation protection, which would in turn spread the enemy fleet thin. They might even get lucky and turn back Skywalker’s enquiries, assuming he wasn’t far ahead of Talon in the chase. At the very least they’d have to send relief forces to Kathol, likely from the fleet clustered at Sluis Van. New possibilities would open up; he could adjust his battle plan to take advantage.

“I believe,” said Nihl, “A small show of force could be arranged.”

“The Dark Lord is most wise,” Talon bowed her head. Nihl could the creak of relief in her voice and fought another stab of pity. With the Force or without, they were still Sith, and there was no room for empathy in what lay ahead.

Chapter Fourteen

Ania and her mother said little on the flight back to Concord Dawn. From the moment Marin had stepped foot inside *Free Agent* her expression had warded off inquiry. Once they were en route she'd quietly asked her cousin whether they'd gotten what they'd come for. Liem, normally supplier of confidence and optimism, had given a noncommittal reply.

After that she asked AG-37, who replied, "I'm sorry, Ania, but I was on guard outside the homestead the entire time."

"Of course you were," she said dryly. She hadn't expected her mother to allow AG-37 a glimpse of her business, but she'd hoped.

"You should know," the droid continued, "That approximately two a half minutes after they entered the home, my audio receptors picked up a series of four blaster shots inside the house." He paused long enough for her heart to pound before adding, "Stun shots, specifically."

"You're sure?"

"My audio receptors do not make that kind of mistake."

She felt a tiny bit relieved. "How much longer did they stay inside the house?"

"Nearly ten minutes. My infra-red scanners picked up activity in the upper levels of the house. I imagine inside the bedroom."

Ania envied him his fine-tuned mechanical organs. She also wondered whether his metal chest was immune to heartbreak. "So you don't think anyone was killed?"

"My sensors detected no cooling of bodies."

"Well, that's something."

It didn't explain what Marin didn't want her to know. She'd forced herself on the mission in the stupid hope it might crack open the wall between her and her mother. Instead it seemed to have mounted the wall higher. Marin and Liem hadn't brought any new cargo back from the Woxu homestead, so they hadn't been thieving either. She wondered if her mother had done something with the Force.

"Did your sensors pick up any... electric discharge?"

His lower photoreceptor pulsed thoughtfully. "Could you clarify?"

Ania lowered her voice, though they were alone in the cockpit. "You know... like Sith lightning?"

"I detected no such thing, Ania. I'm afraid the only way to get the truth behind those events is to ask your mother."

"Yeah, that'll work," she sighed.

When *Free Agent* returned to Concord Dawn their encampment was deep into the planet's nightside. Ania was therefore surprised to see the place so busy. Bodies were moving about in the open yard, some in armor. The camouflage nets had been halfway peeled off the other ships and their loading ramps were opened.

Ania had a bad feeling about this. She, Sauk, and AG-37 followed Liem and Marin out into the night. The two Mandalorians made a straight fast line for Hondo Karr and Tes Vevec, respectively in black and gold armor. They formed a tight huddle that disinvited visitors, but Marin spotted another familiar face and trotted after it.

"Hey," she called to Yangar Skirata. "What's going on? Are we striking camp?"

She didn't know how she was related to him more than anyone else with that surname, but her distant cousin was a dark tree of a man topped by bushy hair and beard. Unlike many others he wasn't in combat gear, but nearby glowlamps and harsh shadows made his face looked fierce.

"Hondo just gave the order," the tall man said, "We're going after Auchs."

"What does that mean?" Sauk asked from Ania's shoulder. "Are you trying to capture him?"

Or kill him, Ania thought. Yangar said, "Auchs had gone to the Outer Rim. He's brought a whole fleet of Mandos with

him, thousands of warriors. This is the biggest thing he's ever done."

Given the news from Volgma they'd received that shouldn't have surprised, but the frenzy around the camp knocked Ania off-balance. AG-37, voice calm as ever, asked, "Does this have to do with the recent Nagai conquests in the Saijo and Setia sectors?"

"Give the droid a medal," Yangar said. "But this has gotten a lot bigger than the Nagai. Haven't you heard?"

"We must have missed it." Ania crossed her arms. "What's going on?"

He counted off fingers. "First Nagai *shab* stuff up. Then Auch's barves join 'em. Then the Ssi-ruuk show up and wallop the Federation counter-strike back to Sluis Van."

"Ssi-ruuk?" Sauk echoed. "I thought they were..."

He trailed off. None of them knew anything about the reptilian aliens from the Unknown Regions who had, on several long-ago occasions, tried to muck up the charted galaxy. They'd seemed so irrelevant nobody had bothered to learn.

Nobody except AG-37, who said, "This is quite alarming. The last military Ssi-ruuvi incursion was over a century ago, during an abortive attempt to take the planet Bakura."

"Don't tell me you were there," Ania sighed.

"I was not, but I monitored the events from afar. Native Ssi-ruuvi technology utilizes a unique type of droid powered by energy derived from organic sources, so they were naturally of some interest to me."

"The point is," Yangar interrupted, "The fight's expanding fast. They're pushing up the Corellian Trade Spine and our sources say most of Auch's people are gonna be used to take the Javin sector. We're gonna be there to meet 'em."

"With all due respect," said AG-37, "What good will a handful of renegade Mandalorians be against three combined battle fleets?"

Yangar's scowl suggested he had no damned clue. "We're not gonna do anybody good sitting on Concord Dawn. Hondo's got contacts in the Alliance. He's gonna see what we can coordinate with them."

"I am guessing," AG-37 pressed, "That you also have sources inside Auchs' fleet, feeding you intelligence?"

Yangar held in a suffering sigh. "Yeah, we've got friends there. Nobody super-close to Auchs, but people who can tell us where he'll go next."

Ania bet the Alliance, at least, would be glad for that intel. "So you're just packing up the whole camp and jumping halfway across the galaxy, without knowing what you'll do when you get there."

"That's the idea. If you want to know what *you* should, do, ask your *buir*."

With finality, Yangar turned and hurried toward one of the ships. Ania told her companions, "Wait by *Free Agent*. I'm going to have a chat with Mom."

Her timing was good. As she started across the clearing she spotted her mother pull away from conversation with Karr and Vevec. Ania jogged to intercept her before she got busy with something else.

"I heard what's going on," she said. "What do you think you can actually *do* out there?"

"We'll figure out something," Marin said with new severity in her voice. "Auchs has gone too far this time. He had to be stopped."

"So what, you'll stop him?" She put a hand on her mother's arm. "He's got three armies. You don't have *osik*."

The older woman smirked. "You're picking up some things after all."

"I'm serious. What are you going to do out there?"

"Stop Auchs and stop the Sith. They're working together. We know that. They're wreaking havoc *again* and I won't let them."

"*You* won't let them?"

"I did once. Not again."

"Hey, I thought you were putting up this big plan to expose Auchs' crimes and get him punished. What happened to that?"

"I've been trying to get evidence for years. It didn't work." Marin shook her head savagely. "I was stupid to think there'd *be* proof. The Sith cover their tracks too well. The only way to deal with them is to remove them."

“Okay, say you get Auchs. Say you *kill* him. Then what? It won’t stop the Nagai or Ssi-ruuk or whatever Sith are running around.”

“I’m doing what I can. *You* went after Darth Wredd. Did you stop and wonder what would happen once you got him?”

“No,” she admitted.

“I’m going to stop Auchs and get the Mandos out of this fight. Period.” Marin jerked her arm free. “You can do whatever you’d like.”

Marin started away but Ania grabbed her arm again. “Whoa, hey, that’s it? So long, thanks for nothing?”

Her mother sighed, exasperated. “Thank you, Ania. For all the ways you’ve tried to help us. I appreciate that. I do. But if you think chasing after Auchs is crazy, there’s no reason you have to do it.”

“It is crazy. But dammit, you’re the one who had your guys *kidnap* me on Esseles. You dragged me back into your life. You’re going to just drop me loose now?”

“I should have never done that. I’m sorry. I should have just let you think I was dead.”

Ania felt so frustrated she could scream. “No. Not good enough. You can’t undo what you’ve already done.”

Marin went very still. “I’ve known that since I was fourteen and took off Gevern Auchs’ head. I know you can’t unring a bell. Things need to be set right. I’ve made mistakes with you, and I’m sorry, but right now I have an ever bigger one to fix.” Her free hand took Ania’s arm. “Live whatever life you want, Ania. Don’t live mine.”

The old woman released, pulled free, and walked away. Ania watched her back recede into the night. The rest of the clearing was still busy with people moving, and for a dizzy moment the whole dark world seemed to wheel around her. Then her vision found AG-37 and Sauk watching her from beneath *Free Agent*’s nose. Their familiar faces stabilized the world and she hurried toward them.

“Looks like we’re heading back out,” she told them.

Gently AG-37 said, “What do you plan to do, Ania?”

She looked between the droid’s small photoreceptors and the Mon Cal’s bulbous eyes; one face unreadable, the other expectant. They were waiting on her to command them once

again. She hated that weight but had quit trying to shirk it years ago.

"She told me to live whatever life I want," Ania said. "That was her way of saying goodbye."

"Then... we're not going with her?"

She couldn't tell if Sauk was hopeful or disappointed. She only knew she'd come too far and invested too much to walk away now.

"I'm doing what I want, and that's going to the Outer Rim with all these Mandos. A-gee, I don't even have to ask what you'll do. Sauk, if you want us to drop you off someplace on the way, maybe with some refugee cell--"

He shook his head. "I'm not walking away either."

Of course he wouldn't. She prayed they didn't get hurt because of this, and with a pang realized her mother felt the same way about her.

"Okay," Ania said. "Let's prep for turnaround."

The next time disaster tore Shado from his sleep, it didn't even have to decency to wait until sunrise. He fumbled in the dark for his buzzing comlink and when he finally got it on, Storr insisted he come to the president's office immediately with no further explanation. Still half-asleep and dreading whatever came next, he stuffed himself into clothes and hurried to the meeting.

There was just a hint of predawn light through the office window and three figures silhouetted against it: Recado, Storr, and the Bakuran Defense Force's General Koregion. At the sight of the last Shado's heart fell further.

A holo-image projected over the president's desk, showing a building complex with a ring of lit-up markers on the surrounding terrain. It looked like a siege, and Koregion's words confirmed it.

"We're bringing in speeders to secure the airspace," the general was saying. "They should be on-site within twenty standard minutes."

"I don't expect them to be going anywhere," said Recado.

"I agree. But when the time comes to send troops in, we'll have people standing by for aerial insertion."

The president winced at those words. "*If* the time comes."

“Frankly, Mister President, I don’t see any other option. I suggest a fast strike now, before they have time to entrench.”

Shado cleared his throat, drawing their attention for the first time. “Can someone explain the situation?”

Storr said, “The P’w’eck have seized control of the repulsorlift coil manufacturing plants.”

He noted the plural and thought back on the reports he’d read. “All six of them?”

“Five, including the largest one outside Salis D’aar,” said Koregion. “This was a pre-planned, concentrated attack.”

“Vlothaw?”

“He’s inside the Salis D’aar plant,” Recado said.

“I don’t understand. What happened? They were going to wait for the tribunal, and Federation oversight.”

“There was another round of attacks on P’w’eck settlements. They blame local security for failing to stop it,” Storr sighed. “And unfortunately, the Federation has yet to act on any of its guarantees.”

“This isn’t just impatience, this is treason,” Koregion insisted. “They’re holding our entire economy hostage.”

Shado looked at Recado. “Did they release a statement?”

The president nodded. “They’ve rejected the previous plan for settlement. They insist the heads of security be sacked and want criminal punishment for all humans who attacked their homes.”

It sounded reasonable enough to Shado, but he knew it would be virtually impossible to identify which humans had attacked the P’w’eck settlements, just like it was impossible to tell which P’w’eck had collaborated with the Ssi-ruuk. Recriminations would fly back and forth between sides until P’w’eck and human assumed each other to be enemies, if they didn’t already.

He looked to Storr. “Request emergency assistance from Coruscant. Get arbitrators out here.”

“Vlothaw’s already rejected Federation help.”

“Get them out here anyway. We have to try.”

Koregion shook his head fiercely. “Vlothaw and the P’w’eck have committed an act of insurrection in favor the Ssi-ruuk. The only response is a military one.”

“What about all the P’w’eck settlements across Bakura?”

“Put them under lockdown. No one goes in or out.”

“How long is that going to last? There are millions of P’w’eck on Bakura. They’ve been here for over a century. Do you think you can just turn their settlements in prison camps? The Federation won’t stand for that.”

“The Federation has bigger problems than Bakura right now,” Recado said bitterly. “They’ve made that abundantly clear.”

Storr flinched from his glare. “That isn’t necessarily true. The seizure of the repulsorlift plants threatens vital supplies in wartime.”

“All the more reason we should act now instead of waiting for Coruscant to notice us,” Koregion pressed.

Shado said, “If the P’w’eck made an ultimatum there must still be ways to communicate with them. To negotiate.”

“They’re not interested in negotiation, only sabotage.”

Shado leaned toward the president. “If you send in troops it’ll be bloody, and it will ruin the last chance the humans and P’w’eck have of sharing Bakura peacefully. There’s a good chance the factories will be wrecked too. There’ll be no balance then. *Everyone* will lose.”

“If you have an actual suggestion, Master Jedi, I’d like to hear it.”

Shado knew in an instant what had to be done. It was a perfect solution, the only solution, and as soon as the idea came he embraced it without hesitation. This was something only he could do; it was why he’d come to Bakura in the first place.

He knew it was clearly as if the Force was speaking to him. Maybe it was.

Breathless, Shado said, “I’ll go into the factory to negotiate.”

“Out of the question,” Storr snapped.

He’d expected that, and told the ambassador, “Think. Someone needs to keep a dialogue open. P’w’eck respect Jedi, which is more than I can say for Imperials. I’m also not Bakuran, or human. I can get Vlothaw to listen to me so long as *you* get help from Coruscant. Like you said, this standoff threatens vital resources when the Federation needs it most. Even with everything else going on, they have to act.”

“You can’t trust the P’w’eck,” said Koregion. “They’ve been working with the Ssi-ruuk from the start. They’ll kill you.”

“I don’t think so,” Shado said. He found the prospect of being wrong didn’t scare him.

Recado sighed. “At the very least, Master Jedi, you’ll be giving them leverage over the Federation and can’t expect to walk out of that factory freely. You’re volunteering to become a hostage.”

“I know. I’m prepared for that. I’m a *Jedi*.”

The last word brought reactions from every face. Koregion’s twisted in skepticism, and Storr’s revealed mild distaste he’d kept well-hidden thus far. Recado’s expression softened, and he said, “You’re either very brave or very foolish. I wish I could tell which.”

If the Force was with him- and he believed it was- then Shado was neither. “Let me go to the factory. I’ll offer myself to the P’w’eck. I can resolve this, Mister President. You need to let me try. Frankly, you have nothing to lose.”

Recado’s eyes darted to Storr and Korregion, both disapproving, then back to Shado. “All right. You can go the factory, but there’s no guarantee they’ll even speak to you.”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

The president nodded. “I hope your Force is with us, Master Jedi.”

“Not as much as I do,” Shado said, and tried for a smile.

Chapter Fifteen

There was very little to be thankful for right now, but Marasiah was glad that they'd held a memorial service for Antares and Sekh-Mad-Har immediately after their bodies were turned to Coruscant. It had been a stately affair held in one of the Galactic City's largest public arenas. Dressed in white, Marasiah had lit the pyre for both their bodies. Surrounded by every remaining Imperial Knight in full scarlet armor, she'd watched her husband disappear behind a blinding veil of flame. Her heart had ached to wonder whether Antares- or any Knight or Jedi- could become one with the Force now. When her time came, she didn't want to merge with it to find all the people she'd loved absent.

Though she'd felt bitterly alone during the ceremony, the arena had been filled with dignitaries, politicians, and even ordinary citizens come to pay respects. Antares had always scoffed at ceremony, saying it was at best necessary distraction from what needed to be done. Maybe he was right, but she was still glad so many had gathered to pay him the respect he deserved. Senators from Imperial and Alliance systems had stood shoulder-to-shoulder in his honor. Looking from face to face and touching them one-by-one in the Force, Marasiah had felt that earnest grief that united them all. Awful as it had been, the ceremony had given her a small speck of hope for the future.

Less than a day later, the police report from Bavinyar went public.

It was a bomb detonated at the heart of Federation politics. After discovering the assassin's body in a grimy motel on

Cephalia's outskirts they'd identified him as a human named Korag Aynes. From there, her uncle Hogrum's intelligence people did the rest. They confirmed that a man with the same name had been in Admiral Gar Stazi's renegade fleet during the war, and that he'd served as a private in a platoon commanded by then-captain, now-senator Porat Derrol. Those facts alone set the news-nets afire. So, too, did leaked footage of the inside the hotel room where the killer's parting message was clearly visible: DEATH TO ALL TYRANTS! splashed in red beside an Alliance crest.

Tem Brighton released a recorded speech condemning acts of violence in all forms and pledged complete loyalty to the Federation and Empress Fel. He got it out fifteen minutes after Senator Eldon's speech excoriating Alliance terrorism and the anarchists in the senate who supported it. Plenty of other senators also put out recorded statements, including Senators Rey'lya and Kormesh, who still held stubbornly to the speaker's race despite dwindling attention on the news-nets. Eldon's speech claimed the most attention, both because of his fifteen-minute head start and because he promised to bring treason charges against Senators Derrol, Brighton and anyone else even loosely connected with the murder of the empress' consort. He also called for the speaker's election to be postponed, something he'd avoided doing publicly the first time around. The election was just two days away and the first attempt to delay the vote, pressed by some Imperials, had been blocked by a coalition of Alliance senators and a handful of Imperial ones.

"There's not enough time for it to gain traction," Hogrum explained as they met in her office. "If there were, it *might* be able to pass. The Alliance bloc is split over this. Some want to charge ahead with the election and insist they did nothing wrong. Brighton's spoken out in that position. Others want to slow things down and make sure they remove their radicals first."

Good luck with that, Marasiah thought. Bavinyar had radicalized everyone. As her uncle paced before her desk she slumped and looked through the window. Outside the sun was going down. Marasiah felt both tired and restless; she'd been like that nonstop since Antares' death.

“However,” Hogrum went on, “Some Imperial senators *do* want to press ahead with the vote because they think public sympathy strongly favors them.”

It all seemed disgustingly petty. Marasiah struggled to remember why she thought it had been a good idea to appease Stazi’s people with an elected senate. Her uncle had been right; democracy was a nasty business where people wrapped knives in lofty rhetoric and when they stabbed you in the back they earnestly claimed to be doing it for your own good.

Hogrum stopped pacing and loomed before her desk. “Sia, the surest way to delay the election is to do it yourself.”

She finally raised her eyes to look at his scarred, black-shrouded form. “What does Stazi think?”

“Stazi is adamant the election go ahead as scheduled.” His burnt lips twisted.

“I see.”

“If we’re to stop it we must act now.”

“*We*, uncle?”

He drew himself tall. “Sia, this is exactly where you need to assert authority. Even the Alliance won’t dare criticize you for it.”

“You mean they won’t dare insult me in my grief?” she asked bitterly.

“Essentially, yes. You have that advantage. You can’t afford to throw it away.”

“I’d have to convince Stazi.”

“Stazi,” he said, “May be a bigger problem than you realize.”

She sat straight in her chair. “What do you mean?”

Hogrum sighed. Regret was thick in his voice as he said, “I’ve been taking the liberty to monitor some of the admiral’s communications. Though he’s encrypted them, he’s sent several over the past weeks to the personal apartment of Senator Derrol.”

“You’ve been *spying* on him?”

He ignored her shock. “In addition, I know that on the evening following the senate commencement, he attended a private meeting in Derrol’s apartment. This was also attended by other Alliance partisans including Senators

Kaige, Nelloran, Gahan, and Brighton himself. Unfortunately, I don't know what was discussed, but his semi-regular calls to Derrol began after that meeting."

Shock at her uncle's impudence, which itself bordered treason, gave way to new hurt. For years she'd trusted Stazi's honor even as they'd locked horns in the triumvir's chamber. Her uncle's observations were proof of nothing, but they fed into a stream of rumor and implication leading to one awful conclusion.

Marasiah took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. She'd been trained- by her uncle among many others- to be rational and never jump to conclusions. She reminded herself that rumor and implication were all. Derrol was insisting he barely knew Aynes and hadn't spoken with him in years, and there was as yet no evidence to contradict him. There was also no proof that Stazi's conversations with Derrol, his former subordinate, had been political, much less nefarious.

"Sia," her uncle said, "You have to stop the election, at least until we can find everyone responsible for the attack. We *must* have justice for Antares."

"I don't need you to tell me that. He was *my* husband," she growled.

"They tried to take your life from you as well as your authority. You have both. Use it, Sia. Use it before it's too late!"

The more he pressed the more angry she became. She rose from her chair and glared at him from across the desk. "I've made an oath to uphold this new government. I won't break that oath out of grief *or* anger." In a lower voice she said, "I won't become my father."

Hogrum stared back; after a moment he said, "If you don't act now, you might hand victory to the people who murdered your husband."

"We don't know what *any* of them were involved. Unless there's proof you haven't told me about, Uncle?" When he didn't reply she pressed, "You must have more. You're my intelligence director, you're supposed to have something. Except you *didn't* know anything about the Ssi-ruuk going on the warpath again, did you? If you weren't my uncle I'd sack you and getting a new intel director, someone who

focuses on *real* threats instead of spying on his own superiors.”

She’d never snapped at him like that, not ever, and his one eye widened in shock. Marasiah felt a flush of shame for her outburst, but not the words themselves, and when he saw she wouldn’t back down Hogrum bowed his head. “I’m sorry, Sia. I’ve made many mistakes. I admit that.”

“Do better,” she scowled. “Find out why the Ssi-ruuk have joined the fight and how their droids are working. Find out who’s leading the Nagai. And if you have anything *real* on Antares’ killer, I want that most of all. Until then you have better things to do than spread gossip.”

“Of course, Sia,” he bowed again. Though his face was a mask she could feel him blazing in the Force, indignant and unrepentant.

Hogrum left her office in a swirl of black robes. Instead of falling back into her chair she turned toward her window and the gathering dark. Anger still swirled inside her, anger at her uncle, at Stazi for whatever he’d done, at herself for being stupid enough to embark on this doomed unity government, at her father for revealing how darkness could claim her, even at Antares for being gone when she so badly needed him.

All his life her husband had striven to cut through conflict and find the noble purpose. She needed to find that way now but there was no one to guide her. Since childhood she’d been raised to rule and guided along that path by her parents, her uncle, her grandmother, Antares and all the Imperial Knights. They’d all abandoned her, and the only guide left was the Force.

That wasn’t enough, Marasiah realized, and knowing that broke something inside her.

Though Ganner and Azlyn had returned to Coruscant, their mission hardly felt complete. They’d tried to ascertain for certain who’d killed Antares and nearly assassinated the empress. Without their Force-powers, all they’d done was watch the admittedly-competent Bavinyari police track the killer to the room where he’d died. They’d eventually ascertained that Kagar Aynes had arrived on a passenger

liner from Eriadu four days before the assassination. They'd found a return ticket in his possession, which implied the man had intended to flee Bavinyar, then panicked and killed himself after Cephalia had been put on lockdown.

There were still too many questions with answers that couldn't be found on Bavinyar. Ganner and Azlyn had convened in his quarters that evening to talk them over. A long time ago the idea of hosting Azlyn for dinner and quiet conversation would have stirred his romantic imagination. He felt too tired for any of that now and was just glad to have one friend to trust, so instead they sat at his kitchen table, discussing the case over cooling scraps of food.

"There's nothing linking Aynes to Derrol within the past three years," Azlyn told him. "Nothing specific, though we'd have to pick apart the senator's comm records to be sure, and I don't even know if that's possible. He seems to have gone through a half-dozen residences since the war ended."

"Aynes isn't much better." Ganner passed his datapad across the table.

Azlyn looked it over. Director Chalk had managed to pull together a fairly comprehensive biography of Antares' killer. The man had joined the Alliance ground forces at the very end of the Sith-Imperial War, as soon as he'd reached legal age. He'd ended up with a splinter of Admiral Slossar's fleet which had managed to join Stazi's renegades at the end of the war and he'd served for the next seven years as a sharpshooter, the last three of them in a unit commanded by Porat Derrol.

Chalk's records said nothing about the relationship between the two men, but Aynes' subsequent career looked patchy. He'd taken to wandering after the war, possibly because his family on Contruum had all been killed. Ganner wasn't familiar with any of his subsequent employers but they looked like a variety of private security firms. There was some indication he'd done a stint of bounty-hunting. It wasn't uncommon for ex-soldiers to fall into that kind of unglamorous work, and it was possible Aynes had blamed Marasiah for the dispirited direction his life had taken.

Azlyn frowned as she reached the bottom of the list. "That's not right," she said softly.

“What’s not?”

She tapped the screen. “It says here Aynes spent the past ten months working for Perlemian Security Consulting, based on Vorzyd V.”

He was unfamiliar with the firm. “What about it?”

“It’s a front company,” she said, “For Black Sun.”

He frowned. “How do you know that?”

“I shouldn’t say it’s a front,” she shrugged, “It does a good deal of legitimate business, but it’s run by a vigo. What do you know about Vorzyd V?”

“It’s a commerce planet in the Outer Rim, isn’t it?” He’d heard it had popular gambling and pleasure zones, but he’d never been drawn to those.

“That’s right. I was assigned there covertly for a few months.”

Unlike most Imperial Knights, Azlyn had spent time as a freelance agent, travelling undercover through Krayt’s empire and gathering intelligence. He recalled she’d done some work tracing the Sith’s connections to organized crime and he felt a spike of irrational hope. He needed Antares’ murder to be the work of more than some disgruntled Alliance partisan. His friend deserved grander enemies and Ganner wanted to deliver justice with his own hands. When he’d found Aynes’ body on Bavinyar he’d felt cheated.

“Anyway,” Azlyn continued, “Perlemian Security provides muscle at a lot of Vorzyd’s casinos, and other ones in nearby sectors. Black Sun was wrestling control over most those places when I was there, and naturally that meant taking over the security teams. Most people who worked for Perlemian probably don’t even know it’s Black Sun, but it’s their people on top.”

“So it’s all really tenuous.” Ganner felt deflated.

“Not necessarily. I’m sure Black Sun keeps a close eye on each one of its hires, in case it can use them for something special.”

“And why would Black Sun want to kill the empress?”

“I don’t know. The Federation’s been putting pressure on them, and they can’t like that after collaborating with Krayt.” Azlyn put down Ganner’s datapad and tapped her own. “The Bavinyari also sent a message today. They finally found

Aynes' rifle on the bottom of the channel. It was a Merr-Sonn LR-37X, which is a pretty rare model with more kick than other sniper rifles. There's not many portable laser cannons that can knock an airspeeder out of the sky from a kilometer away. It's not for sale on civilian markets, though a criminal organization could always find a way."

"So could an Alliance senator with military credentials," Ganner muttered. Azlyn let that pass without comment.

They were still missing pieces, and they wouldn't find them here. He had no doubt the empress would approve a trip to Vorzyd V to look further into this, but he wasn't sure how much they could accomplish. It would take an Imperial Knight with the greatest Force skills to sneak into a Black Sun stronghold. As they'd been reminded repeatedly over the past year, they were lowly mortals now.

Ganner asked, "Do you think Aynes really killed himself?"

"I don't know if it matters. It's safe to say he was on that bridge shooting at us. Black Sun's not sloppy. They probably sent an agent to shadow Aynes and make sure he didn't talk. He could have shot himself just as easily." She sat back in her chair. "The message came across loud and clear. Perception's what matters."

It twisted Ganner's heart to think his friend's murder had become nothing more than a blame-game between Imperial and Alliance senators. "There's a truth behind this. We have to find it."

"Agreed. I may still know people on Vorzyd, people who don't know I'm a Knight. They might help us."

"What if your cover doesn't hold?"

"Then we're probably dead," she said simply.

They held each other's eyes across the dinner table. At different times they'd both resigned themselves to death and even welcomed it. Yet despite it here they were, in the position to make some good out of lives neither was sure they should be living.

It was shameful to be skulking in Coruscant's back alleys like conspirators and Stazi knew they'd look exactly like that if they were caught. Meeting like this was the least bad option he could think of. He couldn't risk being seen in

public with Porat Derrol, not with all the accusation and rumor swirling around the news-nets and the senate hall, and he'd decided not to risk using a comm. If there was a time to be overly paranoid, it was right now.

He'd been waiting in the alley for four minutes, watching traffic lines pulse high overhead through the night, when Derrol appeared on the far end. He'd thrown a cloak over his head, but the twin peaks of his horns were hard to disguise. Stazi removed a tiny glow-lamp from his own cloak, held it out, and flashed it twice in Derrol's direction. The senator hurried to join him in that shadowed place.

"Is this really necessary?" Derrol asked, more tense than confused.

"This is the time for an abundance of caution," Stazi said. "Especially for you."

"I understand that. But I did *nothing* wrong. I haven't been involved with Kagar Aynes in any way since the end of the war."

Derrol had already insisted as much before the reporters, and he'd had the same righteous anger in his voice then as now. Stazi was glad of that, and to his ears the anger rang authentic. It seemed shameful to doubt one of his own soldiers, but he couldn't afford to take even Derrol on faith.

"Everything here is speculation and slander," the senator insisted. "I would prove it, but I can't prove what I didn't do."

"I'm aware of the difficulties. It sounds like Brighton is standing by you."

"And the other senators," Derrol nodded.

"You're fortunate to have stalwart allies," Stazi said, though he wondered what political calculus those allies would play. Senators from Alliance sectors had fallen in behind him just as fast as the Imperial senators had leaped to attack. The political lines in the senate had been drawn before Bavinyar, but the incident had caused everyone to jump into trenches and Stazi was afraid they would start opening fire, metaphorically or literally.

"I hope I can count on your support too, Admiral."

He looked at that face nearly hidden by shadow. "I'll do what I can, but I have my own position to be mindful of."

“Your official neutrality. I know.”

Sensing faint sarcasm, Stazi said, “This isn’t the only crisis I have to deal with, and frankly, all this one’s amounted to so far are shouting and accusations.”

“The Ssi-ruuk and the Nagai. I’m sorry. With all that’s happening they slipped my mind.”

Bavinyar had kicked off a storm on Coruscant and the bigger one raging in the Outer Rim was nearly forgotten. Stazi still questioned whether that was coincidence but without facts all he had was paranoia.

The Duros exhaled sharply. “Continue as normally as you can. The election is just two days away and it doesn’t look like the empress is going to cancel it.”

“If she tries, will you block her?”

“Yes. I won’t have the senate killed in its own cradle.”

“Good.” Derrol seemed satisfied. “Admiral, what do you think *really* happened on Bavinyar?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “It seems possible that Aynes was a lone radical.”

“But unlikely.”

Stazi nodded in the dark. He wished he had more to tell but Chalk had gotten very selective about the information he shared. It wasn’t helping here and it was hindering the response in the Outer Rim even more.

“Maybe,” Derrol said, “Once we get through the vote in two days, things will settle down. At least for my situation.”

Stazi doubted that, and it sounded like the senator did too, but he nodded.

Everything had worked out better than Darth Havok had dreamed, and he’d required a new respect for Black Sun and its agents. In selecting their assassin from one of Gar Stazi’s ex-soldiers they’d automatically cast aspersions on the admiral, and in using one of Derrol’s subordinates they’d had a true stroke of luck. All Coruscant was swirling with speculation, and the best part was that the assassin had died with enough unanswered questions to keep rumors going indefinitely.

As skillful as Black Sun had been in selecting, arming, and quietly disposing of its assassin, the extent of their success

continued to surprise. Havok had set his agents to keep watch over the drama's key players: the empress of course, Hogrum Chalk, Gar Stazi, Porat Derrol and several other key senators. When two separate spies had combed him to report that meeting between Stazi and Derrol in a shadow-draped alley beneath the government district, Havok had hurried to be there.

Without an audio link he gained little from the conversation, but as he lay on a ledge thirty meters above the two sulking figures he recorded several images off the night-vision scanner of his macrobinoculars. The picture quality was low but he managed to grab a few frames of the two figures bent close, hoods peeled far enough back to expose half their faces.

This was proof of nothing, but in a way that worked best. If Havok chose to disseminate them, Stazi and Derrol would furiously deny the meeting. Their supporters and detractors would each see in grainy images whatever they wanted to see and battle lines would further harden. Nihl's conquests in the Outer Rim would continue to grow and Coruscant would be mired in its own squabbles. Havok had to give the Dark Lord credit; Nihl's plan of divide and conquer was working perfectly. It made the Iktotchi swell with pride to know that they were still Sith, even if the Force was silent.

When his targets split up Havok remained on the ledge. He watched Stazi exit the alley first, then watched Derrol leave and go the opposite direction. Quickly he retracted the fiberchord he's used to reach the ledge and pulled himself up to the roof, where a speeder bike was waiting.

As he started the vehicle, Havok considered. Sith spies had been watching Stazi for the past three years and they knew the admiral's habits. Derrol was a less-known quality but likely to be just as important in the days ahead. He pushed his bike to the edge of the roof, watched the Chagrian's cloaked figure take off in his own small speeder, and kicked off in pursuit.

Havok trailed the speeder from a distance, turning off all running lights on his bike to avoid detection. He hovered clear of the sky lanes, reducing his odds of being spotted or of colliding with another vehicle. Derrol was no fool either; he

took several sharp turns and looped around twice before finally setting course back to the senatorial residential towers.

Derrol's speeder disappeared into the landing bay in the skyscraper's lower section. Havok patched in a quick call to the agent he'd assigned to keep track of the senators and requested the location of Derrol's apartment. The response came quickly, and Havok swung his bike around to get a better look at the Chagrians' quarters. His spies said Derrol hosted occasional meetings with his political allies in the apartment, and that his young wife participated more than was usual for a senator's spouse. There might be a way to use her, Havok thought as he rode halfway up the tower's flank, then pushed away and set his bike to hover in the night sky.

When he was half a kilometer away from the tower, Havok took out his binoculars and scoured the building for Derrol's window. The one he'd been directed to was already lit from the inside, and no reflectors hid the interior from view. Slightly sloppy, Havok thought, but the senatorial tower was set well clear of sky lanes or nearby buildings in order to give its denizens a sense of security.

Havok zoomed in with his binoculars and peered inside Derrol's apartment. He was just in time to see the senator walk into the room wearing a plain tunic, likely having left his cloak behind in the speeder. He saw Derrol's wife step up to greet him warmly.

They lingered in the entry room to speak, bodies angled so Havok could see them both in profile. When he saw the side of the Chagrian woman's face something stirring in memory. He tried to increase the binocular's zoom but it was already maximized.

He examined that face again and the resemblance was still there. His heart quickened.

Havok lowered the binoculars and edged his bike forward another fifty meters. He didn't want to risk getting closer. When he brought up the binoculars they were still talking to one another near the door, and the amplified image raked across the woman's face and body. When they finally turned to go to the other room her entire face was briefly visible, confirming Havok's suspicion.

After the fall of Darth Krayt, Lord Nihl had gathered all the One Sith together save for Darth Maladi, who'd hidden on Te Hasa, and Saaraï, the half-trained daughter of the traitor Wyyrlok. Finding the latter had become a low priority, nearly forgotten. They'd underestimated her; in three years she'd managed to make herself wife of one of the Federation's most important politicians.

Havok had no idea what Saaraï had planned or what threat she might represent. He only knew that, of all the tangled schemes playing out on Coruscant, hers had suddenly become the most important. He watched them speak without hearing their words, and when they retreated to a room out of view, Havok kicked his bike to life and rushed back to base. Lord Nihl wouldn't be happy with the news, but he had to hear it.

Chapter Sixteen

When *Mynock* dropped out of hyperspace over Sebiris the first thing visible was the planet's sphere of blues, greens, and violets. Then they saw the flash of explosions, small but constant, scattered across the northern continent, and it was clear something had gone very wrong.

This was supposed to have been an uneventful landing and only Cade, Deliah, and Kyra had been in the cockpit. On Cade's call, everybody else crammed inside as well, pushing Kyra tight against the back of Deliah's co-pilot seat.

"Those look like ships in low orbit," Jao squinted as *Mynock* drew closer to the planet. As yet nobody had started attacking them, but Deliah had warmed up shields and weapons just in case. "Can we get a reading what kind?"

Deliah checked the sensor console. "Looks like Nagai ships. Must be two dozen. None of 'em are very big."

Mynock wasn't a big ship either. Kyra's hand clenched the seat-back tightly as Lowbacca roared. From the far rear of the cockpit, C-3PO's tinny voice said, "Master Lowbacca is quite right, even one ship could do us great damage. I recommend we withdraw immediately."

Cade, though, stared at the planet with hands wrapped tight around the throttle. "Blue, where are they hitting?"

She checked sensors again. "They're pounding the central continent, where the big settlement's supposed to be."

"Isn't the hypergate nearby?" asked Kyra.

"It is," Cade said, and *Mynock* jumped forward.

"Oh dear," C-3PO quavered, "Master Cade, I strongly recommend against this course of action. The odds of

surviving a direct assault against that may Nagai warships is appoximately-”

Cade ignored him. “Jariah, Jao, get to the gun turrets and get ready to blow stuff up. Blue, can you man the missile launchers?”

“Will do,” the Zeltron nodded, then muttered, “I hope you know what you’re doing, Cade.”

“Me too, darling,” he said, just as low, then told Kyra, “You’re gonna wanna strap into something.”

She secured herself in the chair behind Deliah’s as Lowbacca took the other seat. The planet had swelled to fill the entire viewport, and she could more clearly make out the fight in the upper atmosphere. The Nagai ships- each one a strange patchwork vessel, no two alike- seemed to be firing on the planet’s surface, while small local defense craft, mostly Incom starfighters and gunboats, were trying to hold them off. As of yet, none of them had turned attention to *Mynock*.

Lowbacca roared and C-3PO said, “You are quite right. I had no idea the Nagai had invaded the Kathol sector. This is most distressing.”

“Why would they come here?” Deliah muttered. “There’s nothing useful here. No industry, no major resources...”

“Maybe they want to put fear into people,” Kyra said. They were definitely putting fear into her.

“Maybe,” Cade said, still staring dead ahead. “Or maybe they’re after what we’re after.”

“The hypergate? How could that be?”

“Just throwing out ideas,” the man shrugged. “We’re getting close to the hot zone now. Blue, shields up?”

“Shields up,” the Zeltron flicked a switch. “Missiles ready.”

Kyra watched over her shoulder as the first Nagai ship changed vector and took notice of them. Cade tapped his comm board and said, “You boys set in the turrets?”

“We’re here,” Jao reported.

“Then let ‘er rip. Any Nagai ship’s fair game.” Cade turned off the link, grabbed the throttle in both hands, and pushed them forward.

Kyra held tight to her crash webbing as Cade threw *Mynock* into an impressive set of turns and twists. Sebiris' gravity tugged on them as they twisted through its upper atmosphere, and she felt like her brains were going to be splashed out the side of her head. C-3PO wailed in panic and crashed into a wall, but Lowbacca kept his calm as Cade pulled them out of a fierce maneuver.

Deliah checked her scanners. "They got 'em. Our tail is clear."

"Good. Let's get low and see how bad the damage is," said Cade as he pushed *Mynock* into a dive. Clouds whipped past the viewport and the northern continent swelled before them. Kyra tracked vast swathes of forest, green tinted violet, with barely anything to interrupt the expanse save pillars of rising smoke that marked areas pounded by Nagai warships. It seemed a random, senseless smattering of destruction, and she wondered if the raiders really had come here just to spread fear.

When *Mynock* levelled out over the jungle she spotted the method to this madness. The greatest cluster of smoke was on the horizon, dead ahead. Even now turbolaser fire was pouring down from above and adding to the devastation. As they grew closer she saw the first gnarled, blown-out towers and realized this was what remained of Sebiris' largest city.

"You got coordinates for the hypergate?" asked Deliah.

"Yeah, I got it," Cade said, and twisted *Mynock* to the side before it flew right into the path of devastation. Kyra strained her crash webbing to get a better look at the charred, blackened cityscape. From this height she could only imagine the horror on the ground but they came to her as vividly as old memory: choking ash, blinding smoke, the reek of charred flesh and the shuddering knowledge that nothing would be the same again.

Mynock veered over a scorched patch of jungle. Cade added elevation to get a better view, and Kyra spotted more smoke pouring from a clearing up ahead. There was no laserfire raining down at the moment, so Cade slowed for them to get a better look. A great hexagonal dome rose in the middle of the clearing; its surface had been partially cut away, but the structure still stood despite the black scorch-

marks on its shell. Whatever the thing had been made from, it was durable. Nonetheless, more impact craters ringed the clearing, and there was no telling if anyone had survived.

“What do we do now?” Kyra asked.

Cade hesitated, then he pulled *Mynock* into a climb and said, “Can’t do anything until we clear the bad guys off. Shields and guns still ready, Blue?”

“That they are,” she said tensely.

“Good.” He tapped the comm button and told the men in the gun turrets, “Get ready for more dancing!”

Mynock plied straight upward. Kyra was slammed into the back of her seat and poor C-3PO was sent sliding out of the cockpit and down the access corridor. As they pushed through the atmosphere the sky’s faint blue peeled away, revealing starlight scarred by combat. One larger Nagai frigate was in low orbit, firing away at the settlement while Seberis’ gunships tried vainly to fend it off.

“Get ready,” Cade called, and punched them toward the Nagai.

The frigate shifted a few turbolaser cannons to fire on the approaching freighter, but the big bolts were easy for Cade to move around. At the same time Jao and Jariah began firing forward with the gun turrets, and Kyra watched their first shots splatter against the frigate’s shields, right beneath the shield cluster. Cade flew them straight until they got close enough to Deliah to punch out a set of concussion missiles, after which *Mynock* veered nimbly away.

Lowbacca gave a happy roar as their missiles slipped through the shields and scored a hit on the engine section. The frigate continued to fire and Nagai starfighters finally took notice of them, but Cade nimbly wound them around pillars of superheated plasma. At the same time Jao and Jariah pumped return fire out of the turrets and picked off the enemy snubfighters one at a time.

As they weaved in and out of the frenzied fight, Kyra’s attention stayed on Skywalker. The man clenched the throttle with both hands as he pulled them through the crazy maneuvers and his face was bunched tight in concentration, lips curled and teeth bared in an angry scowl. Despite that, there was a strange calmness to him, a stability. Even when

explosions battered the shields and rocked them in the cockpit, Cade's attention was always dead ahead. Every second he acted and reacted and never showed the stress or primal fear that was pumping through Kyra.

She wondered if the Force was guiding his hand, or if he was guiding it. When she'd first met Skywalker back in Rav's treasure cave on Socorro, she'd struck him as a ferocious, almost animalistic fighter, but she realized now that when the Force guided him, he attained a savage grace.

Realization made her heart swell and fear recede. With the Force protecting them, they could survive even this. She was in awe of his mastery and craved to one day wield that power herself.

Cade swung them around for another pass at the Nagai frigate. This time some of the local gunboats joined in for a run on the command section, and together they managed to overwhelm the shields and tear through parts of the superstructure. At the same time Jao and Jariah kept picking off starfighters, winnowing down the frigate's defenders. By this point the ship had stopped firing on the planet altogether and was using its turbolasers entirely for defense.

And then, suddenly, the frigate pushed away from the planet. It pivoted its nose toward black space, gunned sputtering engines, and pushed out of Sebiris' gravity well on a pillar of blazing thrust.

Lowbacca roared triumphantly and Kyra said, "They're running!"

"Looks like," Cade said with just a hint of satisfaction. "What about the rest of 'em?"

Deliah checked her sensor board. "They'll pulling out. Looks like they're making a run for it."

"Did more help arrive?" asked Kyra.

The Zeltron shook her head. "Nope. My guess this was a lighting raid, maybe a feint. They're not here to occupy the planet, just make it hurt."

"Right," said Cade. "They'll force the Federation to spread its fleets thinner too, and put plenty more systems on edge."

Knowledge that they had not, in fact, singularly turned the tide sobered Kyra and reminded her of the devastation smoldering on the planet below. "What now?"

“Now we go where we were *supposed* to go in the first place,” Cade said as he pushed *Mynock* back toward the planet. “Just pray there’s something left for us to see.”

There was nothing more grim than the aftermath of a battle, especially one as one-sided as the Nagai strike at Sebiris. Rescue crews began swarming over the main settlement, and while they’d need plenty of help, *Mynock* first went for the clearing forty kilometers northwest, where the ancient hypergate still sat, shielded from the brunt of the attack by the huge hexagonal dome made of unknown substance.

The hypergate had fared better than anything else during the attack. After *Mynock* set down in a scorched-clear patch beyond the excavation pit, her crew got out and delivered what first aid they could. The archaeologist encampment had been almost totally burned away, and while some researchers had found shelter beneath the ancient dome, many had been vaporized in the initial blast.

Even the survivors were wounded, every one of them. With relief operations focused on the city, *Mynock* was the only one bringing aid to the archaeologists for the first few hours after the attack.

When more help finally arrived, it was a relief. The wounded- essentially the entire surviving excavation team- was laid out on pallets at the clearing’s edge, and Cade began asking whether the person in charge had made it through the attacks. Several of the more lucid researchers pointed him to the group’s sole Cerean. Akk-Morr-Baun had luckily avoided damage to his cone-topped cranium, but one arm had been badly torn up by shrapnel and he’d been put under sedation until the newly-arrived medics could fit him with a bacta cast. He wasn’t going to be waking up anytime soon, and Cade started mentally calculating how long they should stay. Daylight was waning, and shadow were falling over the battle-scarred clearing.

As he thought, the researcher whose pallet he was squatting beside reached up to touch his forearm. The woman- middle-aged, short-haired, with bandages over burns on the right side of her face, said, “You... I know you, don’t I?”

Cade hated being recognizable. "I doubt that, darling. You've had a rough day. Messed with your head."

"No... I heard you were alive... Cade Skywalker, isn't it?"

He exhaled. "And what if I am?"

The woman's lips curved into a dry smile. "I knew it... They say you can still use the Force... That you're still a Jedi."

"I've heard about this 'they' person. They're usually full of *poodoo*."

"They also say you have... an attitude."

He allowed a small grin. "Is that a problem?"

"I just... I've always wanted... to meet a Jedi..." She rolled her eyes to look around the remains of the camp. "I was the team's Jedi expert, you know?"

"What do you mean, expert? You mean Jedi artifacts and stuff? Couldn't have been much of a market for those when the Sith were in charge."

"No. I thought things were getting better." She coughed. "I'm Doctor Relno. But please... call me Mayen."

It wasn't often people offered Cade help, so he decided to take it. Leaning in close he said, "What's a lady like you doing out here, digging up hypergates?"

"Ancient xenoarchaeology is my specialty," she said. "Akk-Morr-Baum... He was my advisor on MrIsst once... He brought me aboard."

"Well, he'll be okay. Just give him time."

"I know." She squeezed his arm harder. "But... something strange has been happening here. A year ago, a little over, a man came to Sebiris. He wasn't an accredited researcher anywhere but he knew all about the hypergate. And he brought us Jedi relics, ancient ones. He said they were from Tython."

Cade was familiar with that name. Best he knew, no Jedi had stepped foot on their supposed ancestral homeworld in centuries. The planet was in the Deep Core somewhere, almost entirely locked away by twisting hyperlanes and gasses left by dead stars.

"Tython," he said, "Are you sure?"

"I know my Jedi artifacts," Mayen said. "They were either authentic pre-Republic from Tython... or damned good

forgeries.” She coughed again. “I saw those... Thought we could trust him. It’s my fault what happened next. That’s where... it all went wrong.”

“How so?”

“That man and his friends... they held us captive and pillaged the hypergate. Stole all the critical parts we might have used to get it running again... Then they ran off.”

“Back to Tython?”

“I... don’t know. He showed us charts... He said they were surveys of a ruined hypergate on Tython... at the bottom of a huge chasm... Maybe they were forgeries. Or real, I don’t know.”

Cade didn’t have to ask the last part, but he did anyway. “Did this guy call himself Reikar Horn?”

Mayen’s response was a tired smirk. “I knew you couldn’t be out here... by coincidence. Had to be the will of the Force.”

“What do you know about the Force?”

“Nothing.” Her smile turned sad. “I always wanted to touch it, to feel it. I wanted it so badly... but I couldn’t. So I became... archaeologist instead. Hunting their artifacts. Never thought... it would lead me here.”

Cade, who’d spent a good part of his life trying to escape the Force, still felt strange around people who’d spent all of theirs wishing they had it. “I’m sorry about the rest of your team. I really am.”

“Horn.... This attack... That young man the other day.... Do you think they’re connected?”

“What young man?”

“He said... Ah... Orath. Orath Panelis. Do you know him?”

Cade shook his head. He had no idea what she was talking about.

“This young man... He looked like a student. He said he was one, and he knew all these things a researcher would know... He showed up at the camp a few days ago. He said his professor on Mrlsst had sent him to help. Akk-Morr-Baun spent all day showing him around. Then he got on his speeder... said he was going back to town to get his things.

He vanished. He didn't steal anything like Horn, but he vanished. What does that mean?"

"I really don't know," Cade said. "I'll look into it, I promise."

Truthfully, he had no idea where to start. He only knew that Khat Lah had been to Tython, which meant they'd be going there too.

The woman shifted her hand on top of his and squeezed it. "You... Jedi... You'll get to the bottom of this. I know you will."

Cade felt uncomfortable with the faith of strangers. "I'll see what I can do. You gotta rest now."

Mayen squeezed his hand again, then released. He gave her a nod, stood up, and walked, glad to be away from her admiring eyes.

Kyra's first clear memories were of war. She could barely recall her mother and father, but the bombing on Svivren that had killed them remained painfully vivid, when she dared to summon them. She remembered the smoke and ash, the smell of scorched bodies, the horrible crack of falling ferrocrete buildings and engine-flares of bombers overhead. All those visceral memories recalled the deeper helplessness of wartime. Death could come at any moment, stealing the ones you loved and the life you lived, and those lucky enough to survive would spend the rest of their days reckoning with the memory of crushing helplessness.

Sebiris brought back all the things she'd hoped were gone forever. Kyra did her best to repress them as she and the rest of *Mynock's* crew tended to the wounded at the excavation site, but once that was done they moved the ship to the outskirts of the settlement, where the devastation was so much worse. Entire city blocks had been vaporized by suborbital turbolaser fire. Towers had been gutted by superheated plasma and still furled smoke into the night-black sky. Broad boulevards were lined with bodies, some wounded and some dead; it was impossible to tell which was which.

It was too much for Kyra. She tried to hide her nausea from her companions, but the sickening stench overcame her and

she ended up pitched on the ground, vomiting up an empty stomach.

Jao took her back to the ship. As he set her down in the crew lounge and fetched her cold water he said gently, protectively, "We won't be here long. They're going to see if they can scrounge up a few supplies, I think... Then we're going to be heading for the Core."

"Coruscant?" she asked after swallowing.

"Not even close. You've heard of Tython?"

She shook her head.

"It's supposedly the birthplace of the Jedi Order, a planet in the Deep Core. I'd always thought it was a myth... But it's real, and according to Lowbacca, the Jedi know a route there."

"So we're going to the birthplace of the Jedi."

"Maybe. There's signs Khat Lah's been there." He was as dazed and tired as her, but enthusiasm showed through too. He thought they'd finally found a worthy lead.

Kyra couldn't share his vigor. "I hope we find something. I really do. I'll just be glad to get away from here."

"We all will." Jao grew sober. "This new war... It's a lot smaller than the last few the galaxy's seen, but it's still nasty. It has to be stopped."

"You think the Force will help you stop it?"

"I know it will," he said, and she was surprised by his conviction. "That's what the Force is *for*. Bringing order, peace, and stability."

"What about the Sith?"

"They twist it for their own ends. They use the Force to bring out the worst in themselves, just like war brings out the worst in people. But used correctly, the Force is the greatest healer."

She wanted to believe that, badly. Sebiris had left her shaken like nothing else on this mission. It had recalled all the helplessness of Svivren and, worse, reminded her that despite everything that had happened since, a part of her was still a child trapped amidst the death and ruin of her parents' home. Kyra prayed Jao was right; that they could yet recover the Force, that she could learn its power, that she would

never feel this helpless and the galaxy would never see such devastation again.

More than anything, she wished she had the strength to make it so.

The voyage to Tython was a slow and careful crawl into the heart of the galaxy. In the Deep Core, stars were packed so tight that prolonged hyperspace jumps were impossible. This close to the great singularity around which the rest of the galaxy spun, ancient suns and drifting stellar gas shifted position constantly and safe passage was only possible through precise maps and computer predictions.

As they were drawn further into the dangerous center, Eli felt like he was being swallowed by something greater than himself. Every time they ended a short jump, entered realspace, and reoriented themselves for another flash into hyperspace, the stars seemed packed tighter around them, the blackness between them more scarce. Space became a panorama of ancient red stars half-veiled by gold and crimson stardust. There was something almost mystical about it, a feeling fueled by the knowledge that so many of the galaxy's secrets lay within these ancient solar systems.

Darth Talon described some of this to him on the long journey. She explained how Wyyrlok, the traitor, had once undertaken a mission to Prakith, former throneworld of the ancient Darth Andeddu, who some claimed had found a way to defeat death. Darth Sidious had made his own base on the world of Byss, a world already drenched in the dark side from its time as a base for the Rakatan empire.

That was all long ago. Byss had been turned to rubble and Prakith was an abandoned world. So, supposedly, was Tython. According to Talon, the planet had been home to Force-users long before either the Jedi or Sith existed as defined schools. That alone was a strange concept to Eli, whose life had been defined by vacillation between the two but was more curious as to whether this Tython represented a world he'd seen mentioned repeatedly in the Gree archives. According to those translation of ancient tomes, the Gree had observed members of younger races being taken away to a planet in the Deep Core- the method was never explained-

and on this world they were taught to ‘breathe the breath of the gods.’ The texts were vague, but they hinted these god-powered beings had resisted an invasion from the Rakatan Empire at its height.

Rumor, legend, supposition. The only way to find the truth would be to see it with his own eyes.

When they finally arrived at their destination, they found an unprepossessing planet that gave no outward sign of its historic importance. From the cockpit viewport, it was simply a sphere of mixed greys, greens, and whites set against dense stellar backdrop. Two smaller spheres swung in orbit, one colored light, the other dark.

Eli immediately checked his scanners for signs of any ships in orbit. Nothing. Talon took the controls and edged them closer. She released several small probes that would circle the planet and alert them if any new ships entered the system. After a full rotation around the planet’s orbit, Eli confirmed, “There’s no other vessels in the area.”

“Do you scan around the moons?”

“I did. There was nothing there either.”

Talon twisted the controls as they rounded the planet’s ecliptic. “Begin a deep-level scan of the planet’s surface.”

“What are we looking for?”

Talon didn’t respond right away; she knew as little of what to expect as Eli. Finally she said, “Look for landed spacecraft. Visible structures, especially ones that look recent. Anything that does *not* look as though it’s been here for millennia.”

That was vague, but Eli said, “All right. This could take a long time.”

“We have no place else to be,” said Talon, and he caught a little bitterness in her voice.

She was right, though. This was their mission, and Tython was the best lead they’d yet found. He was right too: it took hours and hours to scan the planet’s surface. Talon dropped them lower so he could search more thoroughly, and it took seven complete counter-spin circuits around the planet to fully map the surface.

“No ships that I can see,” Eli summarized, not bothering to hide disappointment. “No settlements. There are some ruins, but they’re very scattered.”

“Is there anything worth investigating?” Talon did a better job of hiding frustration, but it was still there.

“Maybe,” he allowed.

He tapped the controls and brought up a two-dimensional image taken by the visual sensors. It displayed an orbital view of the landscape, showing treeless ridges and snow-pale plains that spanned for hundreds of square miles. He tapped the controls again and zoomed in to show what appeared to be round-rimmed crater spread around an object that was clearly not naturally formed. It looked to be a four-sided pyramid. At least from this view, it was far more intact than the other ruins he’d seen from orbit.

“Interesting,” Talon said. “How large is the object?”

Eli checked the sensors. “Each side seems to be over four hundred meters long.”

Talon checked the spatial coordinates on the display image and grabbed the controls. “This is worth investigating.”

She fired their engines and nudged them out of orbit. They fell smoothly through Tython’s atmosphere, burning past thin cloud-drifts as they made their way to the surface. The areas around the object was a vast spread of ridgeland dusted white by a faint layer of snow. The pyramid was visible from a distance, a black triangle jutting high above the horizon. Eli vaguely hoped to see some signs of current habitation, but the most life they saw on approach was a flock of avians giving their ship wide berth.

When they reached the pyramid, Talon flew them in a slow circuit to survey the area better. Eli saw now that the crater in which the pyramid sat wasn’t a crater at all, but an excavation pit similar to the far smaller one he’d seen at Sebiris. Thousands of tons of soil and stone must have accumulated atop the pyramid, then been removed. The remnants had been piled around the pit’s rim to form a raised cusp.

The object itself was made of some rough black stone, and as they drew close they saw it was more than a mere pyramid. The excavation had revealed an entire underside section that seemed to mirror the top. Though much of the lower half was still buried, Eli could tell this structure was shaped like two massive pyramids joined together at the thickest point to

create an eight-sided monolith. Visible on all four top-facing sides was a carved symbol, vaguely reminiscent of the Imperial roundel but distinct, with an outer circle and an inner one marked by eight jutting spokes.

Talon brought them in to land at the edge of excavation pit. They threw on layered clothes, then stepped out into the cold. Standing on the pit's rim, the object was impressively huge. A dusting of snow obscured the surface of the pit itself, but very little was clustered on the black stone surface of the object, which suggested either internal heat or an exterior that warmed easily in the sun. Talon and Eli approached the thing carefully; the young man felt a strange reverence come over him. Talon had said Tython had flourished before the Jedi and Sith evolved into separate orders. Whatever purpose this construction had served, it could contain knowledge more arcane and deep than anything he'd been taught.

In a low voice he asked, "Do you think Khat Lah did this? Someone must have excavated the pyramid. It was probably buried under a hill for ages..."

"I don't know," Talon said simply.

They walked carefully downslope until they entered the object's shadow. Stepping beneath the broad midsection, they went all the way to the place where carved black material plunged into sediment and soil. Eli looked closely at the material before touching. It looked like stone, and despite a slightly uneven surface there was a sheen to it not unlike what he'd seen in volcanic rock. Eli felt the sudden compulsion to touch the thing, bare skin against ancient stone. Without saying a word to Talon he pulled the glove off his hand. She didn't stop him as he reached out. Irrational anticipation seized him. His heart pounded hard and his breath caught in his chest. He pressed all five fingertips against the black surface.

Nothing happened. Heartbeat slowed. Breathing returned to normal. Cold bit into his fingertips until he withdrew them.

Talon was looking at him. Eli sheepishly avoided her gaze. "I didn't feel any.... any heat. Or anything else."

She took his meaning in full. "I do believe this is what Khat Lah uncovered when he came here."

"I was expecting a hypergate."

“As was I.” She stepped back, out of the object’s shadow so she could peer toward the top of the black pyramid. “But to uncover this must have been a massive undertaking. It would have taken many months. It was important to Khat Lah somehow. We must find out why.”

Eli nodded, though as he stared at the same black point, gleaming very faintly in the milky sunlight, he wondered whether the secrets of this object, or Tython itself, could ever be accessible to those deaf to the Force. Though Talon didn’t say it, he was sure she thought the same.

Chapter Seventeen

Seen from ground level, the repulsorlift factory complex outside Salis D'aar was particularly imposing. It was a tangled mountain of machinery a kilometer across and half as tall. Bakura's humans and P'w'eck both had a longstanding aversion to droids, and the place was meant to be staffed by over ten thousand workers. The P'w'eck insurgents had taken control at nighttime hours when staff was limited, but they'd still taken nearly one thousand hostages, and that was at the Salis D'aar plant alone. Though he could feel none of those tense, panicked lives in the Force, Shado Vao was painfully aware of them as his speeder edged through the factory gates toward the broad entryway.

He approached the factory through its afternoon shadow, another sign of foreboding, but he felt optimistic at the sight of two dozen P'w'eck waiting for him at the entryway, if only because none of them were aiming weapons. He'd transmitted his request to speak with Vlothaw; their reply had been to open the gates and let his speeder through alone. It was not a loquacious start but it was a start, and frankly better than Shado had expected.

When he brought his speeder to rest he dismounted and held his hands up, palms-out. Two P'w'eck circled him, scouring his plain tunic with their eyes and sniffing him with flicking nostril-tongues. One jabbed a snout at the lightsaber dangling from his belt.

"I understand," he said. "You can take it."

He'd brought the weapon to remind them he was a Jedi; he'd also brought it expressly to give it up, as a show that he

was willing to work with their rules. The P'w'eck plucked the lightsaber from his belt and held it cautiously between talons, then whistled toward the others. The entryway opened and the herd of saurians ushered Shado inside.

The guts of the factory were a tangled industrial maze, but Shado did his best to emblazon the path in his memory as the P'w'eck led him deep inside. He was eventually taken to an observation room with one glassed-off wall. It looked down on a large chamber, perhaps a convocation hall or a cafeteria. Shado stepped close so he could look on the humans packed inside. There seemed to be a thousand at least, and he scoured their fearful faces and trembling bodies. The hostages were scared witless but none of them seemed to have been physically harmed.

A P'w'eck fluted behind him, and the translator in Shado's ear said, "As you can see, the hostages are undamaged."

Shado took a breath and turned to face Vlothaw. Two more P'w'eck stood on either shoulder, watching Shado with unreadable reptilian eyes. The Jedi said, "Thank you for speaking with me. I'm doing everything I can to resolve this situation peacefully."

Vlothaw whistled and thumped his tail. The translator said, "It is far too late for that. Many P'w'eck have been killed. You see we have not harmed the hostages, though we could have. We are more benevolent than the humans."

That was true as far as it went, Shado thought, if you ignored the many civilians killed by Ssi-ruuk using smuggled Bakuran technology. The P'w'eck were not the perfect victims they claimed to be.

"I'm very glad to see you've treated the hostages well. I came to tell you that arbitrators from the Federation are on the way to help see justice is done." It was true; right before he'd headed for the factory, Storr had reported that he'd wrestled a shipful of diplomats and peacekeepers from the Federation, but it would take a few days to get here.

Vlothaw fluted harshly, "What can Coruscant do for us? They will side with the Bakurans. They want to see the factories re-opened. That is that they really care about."

Though he'd always strived for loftier aims, Shado knew enough about politics to admit Vlothaw was right. "You have

control of the factories. That means you have an upper hand in these negotiations. Before anything can happen, though, you need to prove that you're not collaborating with the Ssi-ruuk."

All the P'w'eck angrily thrashed their trails. "We are *not*!"

"Then how did they get HIMS technology? You say you don't trust the human investigators. I understand that, believe me. If you insist on policing your own people, the *police* them. Show everyone how the Ssi-ruuk got HIMS. The humans and Federation can verify the evidence once you've given it. That's the only way to absolve yourself."

Vlothaw made a thoughtful-sounding whistle his earpiece refrained from translating, then squatted back on reverse-articulated legs, the P'w'eck version of a sit. Shado took that as invitation to long discussion and dropped into a cross-legged pose on the floor.

He said, "I'm willing to stay here and be an intermediary. You don't trust the humans. The humans don't trust you. Neither of you entirely trust Coruscant. I understand all that. I don't belong to any of those groups."

"You do Coruscant's bidding."

"I'm a Jedi," he said with utter confidence. "I obey the will of the Force, nothing else."

"You Jedi can no longer touch the Force. Can you?"

"The Force still touches us. I've spent my entire life learning the way it acts and how to move with it. It comes as naturally to me as walking." He leaned forward. "The Jedi once played a role in helping the P'w'eck liberate themselves, didn't they?"

Reluctantly, Vlothaw whistled affirmative.

"Then let us continue to help. I've trusted you be coming here and putting myself at your mercy. Please, trust me in return. I swear to you, I will help find a solution where everyone on Bakura wins."

Shado meant every word, and every word filled him with purpose. Though he was so alien to the P'w'eck, Vlothaw seemed to note his conviction. He made a series of piping noises, softer than before. "I am still hoping for that resolution, Master Jedi."

"So am I," he said. "And we can find one, together."

Shado knew they could. With the Force or without, he was still a Jedi. In truth, he'd never felt more like one than now.

Bespin was a great swirling sphere of oranges, browns, and reds, and the slow churn of its warm-colored gasses was in stark contrast to chains of explosions that were bursting in its lower orbit. The planet's meager defenders spread across its equatorial belt consisted of a few local corvettes and a handful of Imperial warships rushed here from the Javin system. The sector capital had fortified itself for an attack and was getting one courtesy of Darth Nihl, which left nearby systems critically underdefended.

Yaga Auch's frigate was in the heart of the battle for Bespin, and he watched from its bridge as the Imperials' sole star destroyer was overwhelmed by smaller, faster Mandalorians and Nagai ships. Its fighter screen had already been peeled away and its shields were starting to collapse under volleys from so many directions. When a missile barrage punched explosively through its hull he felt grim satisfaction.

Despite having a tiny population and decayed infrastructure, Bespin was a prime target for Nihl's expanding forces. Once its tibanna refineries were upgraded its natural gasses could be converted to power warships and charge weapons for half the conquering fleet. This would be a more delicate operation than most, which was why the Ssi-ruuk were sitting this one out. The aliens' massive assault cruisers and swarming droid fighters had been directed to Javin, where they were currently dealing impressive destruction on the Federation fleet, but occupying Bespin's floating refinery platforms would require more finesse.

Yaga's frigate wheeled around for another pass at the star destroyer. As its forward missile batteries launched a barrage toward its bridge, he noted a collection of smaller craft pouring out of its ventral hangar bay. He hadn't expected the Imperials to abandon ship, but as he watched he saw they were assault shuttles and landing craft falling toward the gas giant.

They clearly weren't planning to give this up without a fight. Yaga adjusted the communication link inside his helmet and hailed Thorum Rhal.

“Reporting, *Mand’alor*,” the main’s voice buzzed in his ear.

“Imps are launching landing parties. Kill them before they can reinforce the tibanna platforms.”

“I’m on it.”

Yaga’s frigate wheeled around and the destroyer shifted out of view, but he watched on the tactical holo as Rhal’s squadron of Crusader corvettes plunged after the Imperial shuttles. They landed a few initial shots before a swarm of TIE fighters dropped out of the star destroyer and fell on them from behind. Rhal was forced to decelerate and cover his rear, and many of the landing ships slipped away.

Yaga grumbled a swear and changed frequencies again. “*Sor’ika*,” he called, “You see those Imp landing ships Rhal was trying to get?”

“Little busy here, *buir*,” his daughter replied from her Beskad. Yaga heard faint static, possibly a nearby explosion, then: “I see it. Intercept and destroy?”

“Affirmative. Take your whole wing. Stay clear of those TIEs buzzing Rhal.”

“Got it.”

Just as he closed the line with Sora he heard cheers across the bridge, muffled by the crews’ helmets but still audible. The frigate swung around in time for him to see the last explosive bursts that tore apart the destroyer’s right flank and spilled debris into space. The crippled giants’ engines flickered and a mix of Nagai and Mando corvettes began dive-bombing it.

Yaga would have felt much better if those landers had been taken care of. Otherwise the battle for Bespin was still just beginning. He looked at the tactical holo and his heart sunk. Sora’s fighters had started the chase too far behind, and the Imperial landers had drawn another squad of TIEs to cover their descent. The Imps were well into Bespin’s atmosphere by now and they’d broken formation, with two or three landers vectoring toward each major tibanna refinery in the planet’s eastern hemisphere.

Yaga was about to patch in another call to Sora, but she got to him first. Frustration naked in her voice, she said, “Targets and breaking formation and spreading, *buir*. Should we pursue?”

“Yes. Don’t spread yourselves thin. Pick one set of landers and do everything you can to bring them down. Once Rhal’s back is clear I’ll send him after the others. Be ready to clear the refineries on foot if you have to.”

“Understood, will do.”

The link shut off and Yaga growled frustration. With the star destroyer torn up they’d secured space superiority over their target, but unlike the other worlds they’d taken so far, this one had no surface to land on and no strong central government to beg for mercy. The fight for Bespin could drag on for a long time and his daughter was going to be at the front of it. He reminded himself that he’d done everything he could to raise Sora right, and that she’d most likely survive. He also knew that as soon as the last Imp ships were cleared away he’d go down there and join her. If he lost his daughter on Nihl’s mad campaign he’d regret it all his life, and he’d make sure the Sith would too.

A half-dozen miss-matched ships lurked at the lower edge of Bespin’s habitable zone, where swirling gases obscured vision but before pressure got so tight it popped in hulls. Everything outside *Starlight Champion*’s cockpit viewport was an orange-red soup, but the Koensayr scout remained tightly-linked with a sensor bouy it had deployed a kilometer overhead. *Champion* had been old when Marin had inherited it from her father, but the slant-winged, five-engine vessel had speed and maneuverability that belied its rugged appearance. Since taking possession she’d improved shields and added an extra heavy laser emplacement; while she’d never taken the improved *Champion* into combat she’d always known the day would come, and now it was finally here.

Sitting in the pilot’s seat, she watched the relayed sensor information. They’d gotten tipped off about the Bespin offensive from Parc Bralor, who’d foresworn his beloved farming career and joined Auch’s crusade after being promised considerably booty. Bralor hadn’t given them any more information than that, but Marin and her allies had arrived before the battle’s commencement and watched most of it from their ships’ berths on Cloud City. Once the fight

started moving into Bespin's atmosphere they'd sunken their ships out of sight and waited to see how the fight played out.

At first it had seemed like the attackers had won space but lost what would normally be called the ground game; even as the Imperial warships overhead went down their landing teams spread out across Bespin to dig in on the various tibanna gas refinery platforms. Tibanna was highly combustible, which meant those platforms would be even more dangerous to attack than to defend.

The Mandalorians sent down to take the platforms were proving their reputation. From their hidden ships, Marin's people watched a wing of Beskad fighters shoot down two Imp assault shuttles, then swing around and land part of their contingent on a platform to secure it. The rest of the swarm had hurried off to another platform where the Imps were just entrenching, and the two factions had joined in a perilous, prolonged battle in the skies.

Elsewhere, more Mandos were spreading out to take the other refineries. This was the kind of fighting that could drag on for a long time, and eventually Marin said, "We need to give Bralor a call."

Seating in the co-pilot's chair, Liem frowned. "You think he'll talk to us?"

"Only one way to find out. You've got his frequency. Hail him."

"All right." Liem started working the comm station.

As he did Marin glanced back out the viewport. Through the gasses she could make out the blurred engine-glow of two ships ahead. One was the *Black Justice*, a nice swift attack craft currently hosting Hondo Karr and the Vevec siblings. The other was *Free Agent*, containing Ania Solo, her friends, and the dozen Mandalorian commandos they'd agreed to ferry.

No, it had been less agreeing and more insisting. Marin didn't understand her daughter; Ania clearly didn't want to be tagging after her mother and resented having been dragged into Marin's dangerous game in the first place. Marin didn't blame her; she wished now that she'd satisfied herself with knowing Ania lived and left it at that. Trying to fix her old mistakes and her relationship with her daughter

was too much; she was being torn in different directions and in reaching for two goals she might lose both. Yet for some impossible reason, Ania had insisted on following her into a war. Marin wanted nothing more than for her to go away.

“*Su’cuy, ner vod*,” Liem said into the comm unit, jarring her attention back where it belonged. “You hear us up there?”

After a moment she heard Parc Bralor’s voice. It sounded reluctant. “Which Skirata is this? I can never keep track.”

“Liem, the good-looking one. Thanks for the invite.”

“Far as I can tell you *di’kute* haven’t joined the party yet. You shouldn’t have come. You’re going to get yourselves killed.”

“Parc, this is Marin,” she spoke up. “We’re monitoring the battle but lacking specifics. What’s your sitrep? Are you in orbit or atmosphere?”

“Low orbit, doing clean-up. Might get sent down to clear off the platforms next. Not looking forward to it, that’s tricky fighting.”

“We can see that. Where’s Auch’s?”

Bralor’s sigh crackled on the speaker. “You impertinent *chakaar*. The *Mand’alor*’s still up here on his frigate. Far from your reach, I’d reckon.”

Marin tried to cover disappointment with sarcasm. “What, he doesn’t do the dirty work himself anymore?”

“Rank does have privileges, even for Mandos.”

“Who’d he send down to lead the landing teams?” asked Liem.

“Rhal’s in the thick of it right now. He brought Klaett and Gorman down too.”

Thorum Rhal was a fierce fighter, but Marin wondered if he had the finesse to capture these tibanna platforms without blowing himself up. She knew the other commanders by name but little else. She glanced at her battle monitor, spotted the biggest platform, and asked, “Is Rhal on Cresh-Twelve?”

Bralor’s reply was a growl. “You’re keeping a close eye on things. Are we done here?”

“Who took that first platform?” Liem asked. “Looked like a fighter wing.”

“Not sure, I missed that part.” His voice volume dropped, as though he’d turned from the comm, but Marin heard him ask, “Who was it? Praclaw?”

Another voice, extremely faint, said “No, it was Auchs.”

Her chest tightened. Silence buzzed for a potent second. Then Bralor said, loud and clear, “Sorry, we’re not sure. I don’t wanna get *shabbed* for consorting with the enemy so I’m signing off.”

He didn’t even wait for their goodbye before killing the comm. Marin hardly noticed. Her eyes met Liem’s and the young man repeated, “Auchs.”

“I heard it too.”

“Yaga’s upstairs. He had to mean-”

“The daughter. I know.” Marin glanced at the battle readout. From what they could tell, the fighter squadron that had secured the first platform had sent most of its units on to a second. Right now that battle seemed to have tipped in the Mandos’ favor. The fighters had all set down on the platform surface but there were signs of residual small-arms fire.

Sora Auchs was young, as young as Ania, and if she was anything like her father at that age, she’d have landed with her team to oversee the taking of that second platform herself. Marin had never seen Sora personally but she’d gotten images of the young woman in *beskar*: black with violet highlights, almost like the blue-on-black Marin’s mother had worn once upon a time.

“*Ba’vodu*, what are you thinking?”

She looked at Liem. “You know what I’m thinking. If we can get Sora then we have Yaga.”

“That’s going to be a tough fight. And you don’t know what he’ll do if we do get her.”

“Yes I do.” She remembered terror and grief in the face of the teenage boy who’d cowered before his father’s killer. Certainty filled her; this was what she’d come here for. She reached out, touched the comm console, and told all surrounding ships, “Stand by for orders and prepare for battle.”

Ania’s hands were slick with sweat as she grasped the weapon controls. *Free Agent* pushed out of the lower cloud

layers and surged upward, following a trail of five other starships all angled for the tibanna refinery two kilometers above them. From this angle it looked like a collection of brown metal rectangles welded together at perpendicular angles, but as they got closer she saw round shapes jutting from its edges. Those were the tanks full of tibanna gas. Processed or unprocessed, it really didn't matter. They were highly combustible either way and if just a few of those cannisters took hits the explosion would knock the entire platform out of the sky.

They were just one of many things she didn't like about this. Her mother hadn't clarified *why* they needed to take this refinery, only that they did, which wasn't good enough. Nor was she looking forward to wresting it from the several dozen Mandalorian commandos who seemed to have freshly occupied it. That they had several dozen Mandos of their own was little solace, because Auch's people had plenty of backup if they needed it. These six ships were all Marin's people had.

Pretty much the only thing she *did* like about this was having AG-37 and Sauk in the cockpit with her. The assassin droid could pilot this ship with literally inhuman perfection, and if anything *did* go wrong with it, Sauk could save it with a mechanic's miracle.

Also with them was Yangar Skirata, now fully concealed behind *beskar* armor painted a fierce-looking black and orange. The tall Mando leaned between Ania's seat and AG-37's as they neared the platforms.

"Shouldn't you be getting ready to deploy?" she asked.

"Everyone else is standing by. I wanna see this with my own eyes before we go out there."

"You will get your chance in forty-six seconds," said AG-37. "Sharp maneuvers begin in twenty-two seconds. I suggest you hold on."

Yangar gripped their seat-backs tight but didn't move. As promised, AG-37 shot *Free Agent* up past the refinery, then immediately snapped their nose back down. Ania's entrails seemed to ricochet inside her as *Free Agent* dropped toward the central landing platform. The space was already littered with landed Mandalorian starfighters, and Marin's heart

pounded as Hondo Karr's *Black Justice* began spraying the small ships with laserfire. Several snubfighters exploded on the platform, while others were knocked off its edge and tumbled into endless clouds. His angle of fire thankfully cut away from any tibanna gas tanks, and seconds after Karr sprayed his suppression fire another ship, old Jind Skirata's *Bottom Line*, dropped low over the platform and used air-blasts from underside to wash flames off the wrecked fighters.

As the *Bottom Line* set down, the other ships squeezed in too. There was barely enough space, but *Free Agent* crammed in beside *Black Justice* while her mother's ship partially retracted its wings and set down on the far side of the platform.

Yangar was already out of the cockpit. As soon as AG-37 lowered the landing ramp, Ania saw a squadron of commandos disgorge onto the platform. She unbuckled her crash webbing and reached for her blaster rifle.

"You're going out there, Ania?" Sauk asked. He didn't sound surprised.

"I didn't come here to be a passenger." She put a hand on his shoulder. "Stay here. Keep the ship warm. Get ready to evac at any time. A-gee-"

The assassin droid rose. "I will accompany you, Ania."

"I figured that," she smiled wryly. It was good to have AG-37 looking out for her, as always, but she'd feel even better with Jao at her side.

No time for that now. She hurried down to the hold and out onto the platform, AG-37 right behind her. Armored bodies were moving around fast and she strained to see her mother's red helmet. AG-37, standing a meter taller, found her immediately and started moving toward *Starlight Champion*.

Ania was beneath the *Bottom Line*'s jutting cockpit when the fighting started. She instinctively ducked low and hefted her blaster as shots went over her head. AG-37 partially retracted his legs into his body, the droid's version of a crouch. The shooting had started near her mother's ship and Ania started crawling toward it.

Booted feet pounded past her, nearly crushing her hand. Three figures were racing toward the fight: one Mando in

black, one in gold, one in dark green. That was probably Hondo Karr and the Vevecs. Crouching wasn't getting them anywhere so Ania sprang up and charged behind them, trusting their armored bodies to intercept any fire. AG-37 followed, and they quickly reached the entry portal leading into the refinery's bowels. The fighting there had stopped and a group of Mandalorians were charging through, half-leaping over a few dropped bodies.

Ania shouldered alongside Oren Vevec and asked the green-armored man, "Are those theirs or ours?"

"Theirs," he said. "Thanks for coming along."

"How am I supposed to know which armored guys to shoot at?"

"You and your droid stay with us. Shoot who we shoot and you're good."

"He's not my droid. But we will. And where's my mom?"

"You *buir* went in first," Hondo Karr reported.

Of course she had. "Do we have any objective besides securing the place?"

"Just help us clear the upper level," said Hondo as he started up a stairwell.

Ania noticed that wasn't an answer. She and AG-37 followed the Mandalorians up to the second level, then the third. It was a long straight hallway with what looked like office doors spaced out on either edge. Plenty of places to hide, she thought grimly. They had to burst into each room one-by-one to clear it and Ania always hung back, letting the ones with *beskar* go in first. When they were almost done with the hall, laserfire sounded some elsewhere in the building. It was a sustained firefight but Hondo kept them from investigating until they'd successfully checked the entire floor.

Even then they progressed slowly down the next corridor. The fighting grew closer but it became clear it was also a level or two below. At the end of a hall was a sealed-tight lift door, and from the red light on the control panel the lift didn't seem to be operational.

AG-37 wedged his metal hands in the door seal and pried the metal panels apart. Once the gap was big enough, Ania peeked inside. Down below she saw the domed heads of

bodies taking cover inside the lift shaft, exchanging fire with those outside. She looked above and saw the lift itself, locked over their heads.

"Theirs or ours?" Ania asked.

Oren took a quick look down, then said, "Theirs." Ania was impressed.

Hondo and Tes reached for the fibercable reels attached to their belts. The latter said, "We'll repel down, take the *shabuire* by surprise. Stay up here and be ready for cover, but for *osik*'s sake don't shoot us."

"There are superior ways to resolve the situation," said AG-37. "If you'll excuse me."

The droid slipped his narrow body through the gap, then jumped. Everyone crowded to watch as his heavy metal body fell straight down and slammed feet-first onto the deck twenty meters below. Without losing a second's reaction time, AG-37 lashed out with either arm and cracked two enemy soldiers on the back of the head, dropping them. The other two were so stunned they couldn't respond before the droid pumped a close-range stun blast into each.

"*Shab* me," breathed Hondo. "We need to invest in some droids."

From below, AG-37 called, "The situation is resolved. It is safe to come down."

Ania grabbed on to Oren's waist and rode down with him as the three Mandos repelled to the lower floor. AG-37 was already out in the hallway, and Ania was disappointed to see Yangar's squad instead of her mother's.

"How many levels are secure?" Hondo asked him.

"Everything above this. Worst fighting's happening near the processing plant on the south end."

"Then let's go help them," Ania said. "Show us the way."

Progress into the tibanna refinery was going better than Marin had expected. Sora Auch's team had just completed a difficult operation and were exhausted. That, combined with the surprise appearance of a hostile Mando unit, allowed for many of them to be dropped without putting up a fight. As her teams progressed further inside the structure, Marin was in constant communication with her team leaders. In addition

to reporting levels taken they repeatedly confirmed that no Mandalorian matching Sora's description had been captured or killed.

Marin knew she'd come to the right place. Whether it was the Force telling her that or some instinct, it didn't matter. She knew it, and she led her team unerringly deeper into the facility. When they finally reached heavy resistance at the processing plant, she knew they'd found Auch's redoubt.

The tangled pipes and machinery crammed inside this section of the refinery were scored with many blast-marks, and Liem was able to confirm that no tibanna gas was flowing directly into the area; likely it had been shut off by the refinery crew or scattered stormtroopers whose bodies they were stepping over as they advanced.

Auch's Mandalorians had secured one large chamber at the south end of the complex. It rose some four storeys high, with tiered platforms ringing a central pillar. With the three highest levels occupied they had perfect shooting positions at Marin's people trying to push through on the lowest floor. A handful of her commandos had managed to reach cover elsewhere on the bottom deck but most were pinned at the entrance and a few had been gun downed trying to cross to the pillar itself.

It was a bad situation, but Marin had some tools no one else did. Visibility at this angle was poor but she could reach out with the Force and number the enemy in the room: four beings on the second platform, three on the one above, five on the highest. They were all frantic and angry as they defended themselves, and from their auras alone Marin had no idea which was Sora Auch. Only her eyes would guarantee that, and she'd gotten a good enough glimpse of the Mandos on the lowest platform to tell none of them were in black-and-violet armor. Her gut told her Sora would be on the highest level but none of that mattered if they couldn't reach it.

Marin peeked through the door, scoured the walls, and ducked into the doorway before getting a faceful of laserfire. She leaned to Liem and shouted over battle-sounds, "There's windows high up on the west wall. Get on the line, tell one of our teams outside to repel through."

Liem lowered his head, the signal he was on his helmet comm. A minute later he lifted it and told Marin, "Jind's on the way. They'll still get blasted hard."

"It'll distract Auchs long enough for us to get up there." For *me* to get up, she thought. She hadn't used the Force in any obvious way on this mission. Most of her people didn't even know she had it. She'd always known there'd be a time when her secret would out and if it got her Sora Auchs she'd gladly reveal herself.

As enemy commandos kept laying suppression fire on the doorway she asked, "Any reinforcements in sight?"

"Negative. That jamming field we threw up looks like it's working. That only buys us time, though."

"As long as we have this place secure it doesn't matter."

"You want to make a stand here?"

"Here's as good a place as any."

She felt the hesitancy behind his mask. Liem was young, eager, and idealistic, but he didn't follow her blindly. Charging in here after Sora had already made him doubt. Well, he'd get something to restore his faith very soon.

Minutes dragged on as Jind's people scaled the facility's west-side exterior. When they were finally in position, her cousin's voice scratched in her ear. "I've got people in position at all windows," Jind said. "When do we go in?"

"On my mark. You're going to draw fire from the upper platforms but do not enter the chamber. Repeat, don't enter. You're my distraction. Use the windows for cover. Can you do that?"

"Gotta shoot one-handed since we're hanging on tight, but we can do it."

Marin took a moment to gather herself, calm her nerves, and ready the Force inside her. She looked to Liem and the other troops clustered in the hall. To them and Jind both she said, "On my mark. Four, three, two, one. *Mark.*"

High-up windows exploded with a hail of laser blasts. The Mandos on the upper platforms instinctively shifted to return fire, allowing Marin's people a chance to charge toward the central pillar. One lobbed a fragmentation grenade onto the second-tier platform, and he waited until Marin's people were all under the lowest tier's umbrella before he detonated

it. Shredding metal shards exploded into the air, slipping between the armor-plates of the four soldiers clustered there. Marin felt their sudden pain in the Force and with it the thrill of success.

“Up!” she shouted. “Up now!”

Liem and the others stepped out beneath the umbrella and readied their grappling guns for the second-highest platform. Marin put an arm around Liem and gripped her blaster in her free hand. They looked up and saw laserfire still slashing back and forth between the higher platforms and the west windows.

They fired their grapplers as one. Metal clicked on metal and their bodies were reeled upward fast. Marin went with them, but when they neared the second level she let go of Liem and let the Force carry her higher.

Her red-armored body shot through the air, somersaulted, and landed boots-first on the highest deck. She whipped up her blaster and shot the nearest Mando in the back of the neck before the others even knew she was there. Jind and the others at the window ceased their firing lest they hit her, but Marin was still facing four warriors to her one, all of them in *beskar* and almost certainly younger and stronger than her.

But none of them had the Force, and that was all that mattered.

Marin sent out a wall that knocked two of them off-balance and tipped another off the platform’s edge. Already down to three. She ducked beneath the blasts of a brown-armored soldier, pulled a *beskar* knife from her belt, and lunged for him. The man was fast enough to dodge but she rammed into him shoulder-first and slammed him into the warrior behind. Metal cracked on metal and she shoved both of them away, spun, and felt the blaster bolt coming at her a split-second before it hit. She angled her body so it skidded across her chestplate rather than hit it head-on, then used the Force to wrestle the weapon from the warrior’s hand. She raised her own pistol and pumped four shots in fast succession, scattering sparks from blue plating. One more push from the Force knocked that warrior off into a four-storey fall.

The last two Mandos were back on their feet and Marin spun to face them. She saw them clearly now: one large man

in brown and a smaller figure in black and violet. The big man was on her first with his own *beskar* knife. Their blades met and clashed, and at the same time he swung a punch with his free hand that knocked her off-balance and broke concentration. He slashed at her knife hard enough to knock it from her grip. At the same time Sora came around Marin's other flank, blaster aimed for her ribs.

Marin felt it coming, threw out a hand, and caught hot plasma in her gloved palm. She spun around, slipped behind Sora, and cocked a forearm around the young woman's neck. The bigger Mando hesitated at the sight of Marin's body shield and reaching with the Force she felt Jind and his men still watching her from the window, waiting for a chance to shoot.

Marin knew exactly what to do. She was already at the platform's edge. She tipped back and took Sora with her as she fell. Laster blasts lit up the space right above her, taking down the last man.

Marin called one the Force again as they dropped. She slowed their plunge and twisted so that Sora landed first, *beskar* cracking against hard ferrocrete. Marin realized that laserfire in the room had ceased; the place was secure. She grabbed Sora's helmet by the bottom rim and roughly yanked it free, exposing a face she'd seen only in holos. Dazed and terrified and angry at once, it recalled her father's as preserved in memory for forty years.

Marin reached out with the Force one last time to pinch Sora's windpipe. Not enough to break it, just enough to steal her breath and keep her helpless.

"I've got you now," Marin panted, savoring the panic in the young woman's eyes. "And I've got your *buir* too."

Sora's eyes went wide as she gasped for air, but Marin didn't release until she noticed the boots of those gathered around her. She picked up her head to see a dozen Mandos who'd followed her into his fray. Every face was hidden behind a masked helmet but one naked one shoved itself into view. It was another woman's face, as young as Sora's but far more familiar, eyes wide with shock and horror.

Chapter Eighteen

As one of the entertainment destinations of the Outer Rim, Vorzyd V was the kind of world that offered everything from shamelessly overpriced luxury to the cheapest of dregs. Ganner and Azlyn had come dressed for the latter, and while Ganner didn't feel quite comfortable in the battered bounty hunter's armor he'd donned, Azlyn acted surprisingly at home in the hers. She'd explained it was the same one she'd often worn while working undercover in the capital city Efavan, but he suspected it was more because the helmet and visor concealed the scars on her face.

They'd arrived in a tramp freighter selected to be unremarkable and made their way to Efavan's dregs. The neighborhood was called the Warrens and it sat in low land between the more refined Old Bronzan district and the tasteless glitz of Casino Lane. Ganner hadn't travelled the dirty corners of the galaxy as much as some, but this place reminded him of Coruscant's midlevels without the lure of a pretty skyline above.

Azlyn had insisted she'd still know her way around the place, but he caught her hesitating at intersections of narrow streets and once she backtracked entirely. Eventually, however, she led them beneath an awning, through sliding doors, and into a place Ganner had never expected to go.

It was a restaurant, outwardly typical for its long tables and benches, but every occupant was a Barabel or some other very carnivorous alien. Best Ganner could tell, none of the slabs of meat they were consuming were particularly cooked. The sight of so many sharp-toothed jaws tearing raw, bloody

flesh made his stomach turn and with effort he kept his eye on Azlyn's helmet as she led him to the back counter, behind which a pair of reptilian chefs were preparing a nauseating meal.

Azlyn rapped knuckles on the countertop, drawing attention. "Is Kresla here?" she asked through her helm. "Tell him Jamdar wants to talk. He knows I'm coming."

She'd told Ganner that Kresla was a local information dealer and petty crime boss; she hadn't explained what kind of front business he ran. The Barabel chefs snapped something fast between them; then the one closer to the back unleashing a spine-chilling roar.

A door in the ear of the kitchen opened and a broad-shouldered, blue-scaled Barabel stalked toward, tail swaying high in his wake. The reptile's eyes nictated as he took in Azlyn, then Ganner. Then his tail smacked noisily on the tile floor and he unleashed hissing laughter. Ganner looked anxiously back at the restaurant; none of the patrons seemed to notice.

"This one thought you were long gone, Jamdar," said the Barabel.

"I've had some tough scrapes but I'm still around." Azlyn gestured to Ganner. "This is my partner, Sefu." They were both using old code-names.

"Greetings. Come back to my office."

He pushed open a swing door in the counter and let them into the kitchen. Ganner and Azlyn followed his tail as he took them into his back office, which looked disarmingly normal with its wood desk and shelves full of flimsy and datacards.

The Barabel sat on a bench, tail spilling to the floor, and asked, "What brings you back to Vorzyd?"

"We're looking for some information," Azlyn said as they took an opposite bench. Apparently a place with primarily reptilian clientele had no need for chairs with backs. "You've been keeping an eye on the casino bosses, I assume."

"This one has to, given his work," Kresla nodded. Azlyn had explained that besides running his carnivore's restaurant he was also top of the food chain among criminals in the Warrens. For an interstellar criminal syndicate the

opportunity for profit in this neighborhood was minor, so his activity was mostly ignored by Black Sun nextdoor.

"Picked up any big rumors on them recently?"

Kresla made a low hissing noise. "You'll have to be specific."

"Okay. Have you heard anything about how Kagar Aynes, the guy who took a shot at the empress on Bavinyar, was a Black Sun employee? More specifically, that he worked for Perlemian Security?"

Kresla's vertical pupils narrowed. "Where did you hear this?"

"My current employers. They've got a bone to pick with Black Sun and are looking to exploit that little fact. Assuming there's something to be exploited."

"Vigo Pleshchai is no fool," the Barabel hissed. "I do not see why he'd attack the empress. The risk is too great."

"Right now Coruscant is a mess and everyone's pointing fingers," Ganner said. "If Black Sun *did* set the thing up, they've got off free and are enjoying the chaos."

"Perhaps. Perhaps." Kresla's tail twitched.

Azlyn leaned forward. "I know you used to keep a close eye on Pleshchai. Tell me you haven't lost your edge."

"This one has not." His tail smacked the floor.

"How closely have you been watching him? Do you have any of his men on your payroll?"

"That is too risky. There are other methods."

Kresla rose from the bench and walked over to his desk. He opened a drawer, fished through it, removed a datacard and slid it into the projector on his desktop. Two-dimensional images projected in front of them, showing a view of some fairly lavish hallway. He tapped a button to speed through the recording, and a handful of beings zipped by. Several times the view itself shifted angle and direction.

"You sliced into one of his security cameras?" Ganner asked.

"One of his droids," Kresla corrected. "Pleshchai has been buying many recently. He does not trust flesh-and-blood staff."

"Are you sure he won't find out you've got eyes there?" asked Azlyn.

"This one has only sliced one droid, and not one of the ones allowed into Pleschai's office. Those he runs regular software checks on. Technically this droid monitors the public parts of his casino, but it is usually stationed near the hallway leading up to the executive level."

"So you can see if anyone you know is paying Pleshchai a visit," Azlyn said. "Could be useful."

It didn't seem like much to Ganner and he tried to hide disappointment. "Can we review these records?"

"You have one standard hour." Kresla turned for the exit to the kitchen. "And no, you cannot make copies. This one owes you a favor, Jamdar, but it only extends so far."

"This is good enough, Kresla. Thank you," Azlyn smiled.

The Barabel gave a noncommittal-sounding hiss and left the room.

Ganner looked to Azlyn. "Is this good enough? You said you had a few other contacts you could try, right?"

"Yes, but none of them like me as much as Kresla." She sat down at his desk and looked at the hovering holo-image. "Any idea what we're looking for?"

"I don't know. Maybe Aynes."

"I doubt Pleshchai would take him into his office, but you never know. At least we can get an idea who's coming and going from the vigo's office. If we can identify *his* lieutenants we might find an opening."

Ganner didn't know what kind of opening they could pry without the Force, but he sat on the bench beside her and began reviewing the footage. Even played back at high speed it was a long and mostly boring process. Watching the feed in reverse, they recounted Pleshchai's visitors for the past week. Individuals who came and went frequently were clearly the vigo's lieutenants. Special guests always had a droid escort. They marked out four individuals as Black Sun lieutenants- two humans, a native Vorzyd, and a stocky Jeodu- and planned to ask Kresla about them later.

The guests were harder to keep account of. Anonymous bodies shifted in and out of the executive wing and were never seen again. Kagar Aynes wasn't among them, but that was no surprise. The record was nearing completion and a

wave of weariness overtook Ganner. They'd come a long way and learned nothing about Antares' death.

Then one body flicked across the holo and Ganner stabbed the pause button. He had to rewind several seconds to bring the Iktotchi fully into view.

"What is it?" Azlyn asked. "Do you recognize him?"

Ganner leaned close to stare at the face framed by curved horns. Breathless he said, "Eshkar Niin."

When Ganner had last encounter the former Imperial Knight he'd been Darth Havok, and his face had been laced with the red and black of the Sith. The unmarked visage before him now recalled the Niin who'd helped train him over a decade ago.

"Are you sure?" asked Azlyn. "It could be another Iktotchi."

He remembered that she'd never met the man, either as Knight or as Sith. "It's him. I know that face, no matter what color it is."

Through the shock, an elation filled Ganner, and with it a firm sense of purpose. Azlyn put it to words. "You think he's still Sith. Even with the normal face."

"He couldn't walk around freely unless he took that tattoos off." He stored his eyes off Havok and looked to Azlyn. "We know the Sith were involved. Now we need proof."

"And how do you plan to get that?"

"Havok asked Pleshchai to assassinate the empress. Pleshchai probably tasked one of his lieutenants, and *they* would have put Aynes on the job."

"That's plausible."

"Black Sun would want to be as circumspect as possible, but they'd need to use those people at least. We need to figure out which lieutenant oversees Perlemian Security. I hope your friend can help us with that."

"Kresla's not my friend. But I think he'll point us in the right direction."

"And we'll take it from there."

Azlyn's eyes narrowed beneath the lenses of her helmet. "What do you plan to *do*, Ganner? We're talking about Black Sun lieutenants. They won't be easy to get to, and they won't give up information easily."

She didn't have to add that they no longer had the Force to help them. "These people helped the *Sith* kill Antares," he growled. "We know that now. I'll do anything it takes to get proof."

Whatever Azlyn saw in his face, it killed all argument. She inclined her masked head in a nod.

Things had been clear once. Marasiah had been able to tell the right choice from the wrong one as soon as she'd made it, and she'd never second-guessed herself. Faith in her purpose and the Force had been enough. That seemed so long ago she no longer remembered what it was like.

After the results for the senate speaker vote came in, Marasiah had put out a bland statement in support of the vote, secured herself in her office, and told Astraal Vao to refuse all visitors. Within the first few hours her poor aide had to turn back her uncle two senior admirals, and four Imperial-sector senators.

The senate had elected Tem Brighton as new speaker with almost fifty percent of the votes. Eldon had come in second while Kormesh and Rey'lya had, as predicted, split the so-called 'moderate' vote, which turned out to have been a small pool from the start.

She didn't turn on the news-nets; the thought of all those smug commentators and angry guest speakers revolted her. When the sun started going down over Galactic City she opened a link to Astraal and asked whether anyone was still trying to see her. Astraal reported that, for the moment, things were clear.

Marasiah acted quickly. She left her office and, with only two guards to shadow her, made her way through the palace complex's most secure and private hallways until she'd reached the wing that housed the Jedi Order, or what it had left behind. The surprised sentry, a confused young Bothan in padawan's whites, stammered when he saw her but quickly relayed her request.

Ten minutes later she sat in one of the Jedi's dark meditation chambers, perched cross-legged on a cushion facing the Jedi Grand Master. Nearly three meters of muscle covered in grey-brown fur, with claw-tipped hands and a

long face that ended in curved tusks, K'Kruhk's fearsome looks belied his wise and gentle nature. She felt more comfortable sitting before him now than she would with any Imperial.

"Thank you for seeing me on short notice," she told him. "I'm sure you must have been busy."

The Whiphid heavy breath seem to resound in the dark room. "Not so busy as I once was."

"Of course. I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Empress. And my condolences for the loss of your husband."

Just thinking of Antares hurt, but she said, "Thank you, Grand Master."

K'Kruhk said nothing. His small eyes were hidden in the dark and she closed her own, completing the traditional meditative posture. It did nothing to bring peace.

"Do you meditate still, Grand Master?"

"I do."

"Is it... effective without the Force?"

After considering he said, "It does not enrich me like it did. But it's still necessary to find stillness within one's self, even if the Force doesn't speak to you."

"I'm no longer sure the Force speaks to me either."

She heard him shift on his seat. "You feel you're losing your connection?"

"Not like you did. The problem is in my heart, not my midi-chlorians. It's... difficult to feel the Force as I used to." She swallowed. "It's very hard to trust it."

"I know your grief is great, but the Force is still the Force. It moves around us and guides us--"

"So was it the will of the Force my husband die?"

After a tense pause K'Kruhk said, "Even when it spoke to us, the Force did not explain. It simply *is*."

"That's not an answer. Did Antares die because the Force willed it? Or because he was cut off from it?"

"I simply don't know. I'm sorry."

She was letting her anger get the better of her, and Marasiah struggled to calm herself. She breathed deep and steady like she'd been taught, and finally said, "You've heard the results of the senate election."

“Yes.”

“Are you please with them?”

K’Kruhk asked, “Are you?”

Of course he’d throw it back at her. “No,” she said, “But I’m not sure any other outcome would have been better.”

“Do you feel the senators who voted for Brighton were disgracing your husband?”

She restrained the urge to lie. She’s come her to get advice, not obfuscate. “I do. I don’t believe Brighton was involved in the attack... but some of his people *may* have been. Half the senate dismissed that out of hand because they didn’t want to believe it. If someone *does* prove Derrol set me up to die, a lot of them would try to absolve him.”

“You think they hate you that much?”

She’d never thought of it so personally. “They hate what I stand for. They want me and the Knights and everyone around us gone and they don’t care how it happens. If it got them what they wanted they’d embrace murder and call it righteous. My uncle was right. I should have stopped the election. I should have never agreed to a senate in the first place.”

She was getting angry and tried to call herself. It was so hard; when she’d rejected her uncle’s call to stop the election she hadn’t even been sure why she’d done it. Maybe it had been the Force guiding her, or maybe she’d been acting irrationally out her grief and rage. She couldn’t tell one from the other anymore, which was the core of her problem, and talking to this wise ancient Jedi Master was bringing none of the clarity she needed.

As fast deep breath racked her chest K’Kruhk asked, “Why did you agree?”

She could barely remember the days after her father’s death, when she, K’Kruhk and Stazi had signed that treaty. Weakly she said, “To preserve the peace.”

“Preserve it? Or create it?”

Coruscant aflame, a lightsaber in her father’s chest. “Create it,” she whispered.

“You have kept that peace for three years. It’s for the good of the galaxy that you’ve done so. The galaxy needs you to keep the peace, still. I see no one else who could do it.”

She opened her eyes and looked at his dark form. "Do you mean that?"

"I do. You were brought up to rule, but you are no tyrant. You strive for fairness, even in grief. And you learned from your father's weakness as well as his strength."

She stared at that face, alien and inscrutable and veiled in shadow. She probed him in the Force as she asked, "What do you know about my father's weakness?"

"I know he was prideful. And vindictive."

If anyone else said those words, even her uncle, she'd snap back. Instead she muttered, "He loved me."

"He had light and dark in him. So do we all. You've seen those parts, Empress, and you've always tried to keep balance. Even now."

She exhaled. "Is that what I'm doing here?"

"You wanted counsel," said K'Kruhk. "I'm only reminding you of what you've always been. And still are, no matter what you've lost."

The confidence he emanated twisted her heart. She didn't deserve that kind of trust. She'd failed too much already.

"What you deserve does not matter," the Jedi said. "Only what you do going forward."

She looked at him again. "Master Jedi, are you—"

"I see only with my eyes. I hear with my ears. But that is enough." His great, old body rose from the cushion. Standing before her he said, "Take as long as you need, Empress. You'll always be our guest here."

She watched him go and watched the door shut behind him, leaving her alone. Marasiah found she was trembling. Her chest tightened and she keeled forward, and her hands went to her face. Specks of wetness shone faintly on her palms. Tears, now of all places. She'd held them in since Antares' death because she'd needed to convince others that she was still strong, but mostly to convince herself. There was no one here to see her and she bent forward, rested face in hands, and finally let them come.

Sepvis Ulahn, the Black Sun lieutenant in charge of security for the Vorzyd V casinos and beyond, was a stout middle-aged human, paunched and homely but well-dressed

and accompanied at all times by at least two flesh-and-blood bodyguards. He moved freely among the casinos and was often seen on the gaming floors, which made him easy to track but more difficult to get access too.

Azlyn and Ganner took turns shadowing him all day. Because of her facial scars and breathing apparatus, the former was easier to spot and so she mostly roamed outside the casinos and mapped the terrain. To Ganner two things became clear. One was that he'd never get close enough to Ulahn to place the tiny tracking device he'd brought. The other was that if he shadowed the man much longer, his guards would notice and get suspicious.

It was getting dark when he withdrew from the Laughing Luxe and joined Azlyn on the wide promenade running down the middle of Casino Lane, walled on either side by towering buildings and garishly bright advertisements. It was likely Ulahn had a long night ahead of him, but the gangster had so far been using the main entrance when he visited casinos, and he'd be easy to spot when he moved next. They retreated to the speeder bikes they'd brought along from Coruscant, swift models used by Imperial scouts and spies. They split up and began flying inconspicuous loops up and down Casino Lane, one of them keeping an eye on the Laughing Luxe at all times.

Ulahn stayed there longer than at any of the other casinos, and Ganner was started to get weary when he finally disembarked. He went instantly alert when he saw the man and his bodyguards board an elegant and expensive open-topped speeder, take into the air, and begin moving away from Casino Lane.

They'd already decided a plan for tailing him. One hung behind him on speeder-bike while the other stayed ahead of Ulahn, and when the gangster took a sharp turn they swapped places so neither trailed him for too long. High buildings spread out on all sides of Casino Lane and it was like tailing a target through the skylanes of Coruscant, only here you could look down and see solid ground.

It looked like Ulahn was heading east for Old Bronzan, to his home or some other engagement. They made their move before he passed over the low-slung Warrens. Ganner was

the tailer and when the path was clear he drew a long-barreled projectile rifle and gripped it in both hands. Looking through its night-vision scope he marked the bodyguard sitting behind Ulahn in the speeder's back seat.

"Azlyn, do you have the driver?"

"I've got him," her voice whispered in his ear.

"Three," he whispered, "Two, one. Mark!"

They fired at the same time, Ganner from behind and Azlyn from the flank. Each rifle propelled a single metal dart loaded with electric charge. Ganner's took his target at the base of the neck, was Azlyn's came in from the side and stabbed right beneath the collar. Both guards jerked for two seconds before going limp.

Ulahn, still in the back seat, immediately bent over to the driver's side and tried to grab hold of the controls. Before he could do anything Azlyn's bike crashed in from the side, knocking the speeder off-course and nearly tossing Ulahn out for a fifty-meter drop. Ganner slammed him from the other side and activated magnetic clamps built into his bike, locking him in place with Ulahn's speeder. The gangster drew a blaster and spun on Ganner first. Without fear or hesitation he lunged. The blaster went off in Ulahn's hand and Ganner felt the energy bolt skid across the armor on his flank without punching through. He tackled the man, threw him down onto the passenger's seat, and quickly wrenched the pistol from his hand. Ulahn tried to throw a punch but Ganner deflected it with his forearm, then whipped the gangster's forehead with his own gun.

By that time Azlyn had jumped into the speeder as well. Half-laying atop the slumped body of the driver she grabbed the controls and pushed them well of the skylanes. She nudged them toward the nearest skyscraper, now mostly dark for late evening, until they tapped against its vertical face.

"Who the kark are you? What do you want?" Ulahn hissed. He was still struggling against Ganner even though the stronger man had him pinned and both wrists in a vice-grip.

"Kagar Aynes. Bavinyar." Ganner leaned close. "That was you, wasn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. You bastard, do you know who I am?"

"That's why we're here," Azlyn said. "You sent him to kill the empress, didn't you?"

"I said I don't know--"

Ganner released his left wrist long enough to punch him in the stomach. The man retched and flailed out with his free hand but all he did was scrape Ganner's armored chest-plate. He punched the man again, in the face. Knuckled cracked on cheekbone; pain shot through his clenched fist but he didn't care. Pent-up anger found release and he punched the man again.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Uhlan hacked up flecks of blood and maybe a tooth. "What do you karking want from me? I'm a middleman!"

"It was your boss, wasn't it?" Ganner grabbed both his wrists again and squeezed them tight enough to hurt. "Pleshchai told you to set it up."

Uhlan's face contorted in pain but he managed to say, "I'm not gonna do something like that on my own. Whole plan was karking crazy! We should've never done it!"

The gangster's selfish regret made Ganner angrier. He released both wrists and punched the man in the face, one-two. Uhlan held up both hands to block the next blows but Ganner shifted to his stomach and punched him through his suit.

"Who *are* you people?" the gangster gasped. "What do you *want*?"

"Tell us about the Sith," Ganner snapped.

"Sith? What the hell are you talking about? I--"

Ganner couldn't take more obfuscations. He grabbed Ulahn by the collar of his overpriced suit, pulled him off the seat, and half-threw his body over the speeder's edge. Pinning the man's hips on the window-ledge, Ganner grabbed the back of his skull and pushed it down, forcing Ulahn to stare at the fifty-meter drop as his body hung close to tipping.

"Wait! Wait!" the man squawked. "I don't know any Sith! Pleshchai told me to do it, he didn't say why! He never says why! I just do what I'm told!"

Before Ganner could do say he felt Azlyn's hand hard on his shoulder. He looked back; her masked face shook furiously, telling him to hold off.

That wasn't good enough. This was their best chance to find the ones really responsible for Antares' death. Ganner slammed Uhlan's head forward and smashed his nose against the outside of the speeder's passenger door, breaking it and smearing blood across the glossy hull. He grabbed the gangster by the hair, pulled him shrieking back inside the speeder, and dropped him back on the passenger seat.

"I swear I don't know!" the man said through a mouthful of blood. "I never-

Before Ganner knew what he was doing his hands were around Ulahn's neck. The blood-smeared face gasped for breath and he squeezed harder, savoring the ugly man's pain and the fragile feeling of his windpipe beneath overlapped palms. Finally Ganner was in control over *something*, finally he could give back some of the pain and helplessness he'd been given again and again by Havok and Pleshchai, by the Mandalorians who'd kidnapped him and Maladi who'd used him a tool to destroy everything he'd ever loved.

Suddenly Ganner was choking too. A metal-wrapped forearm pressed against his windpipe as Azlyn threw herself at him from behind. Tipping the whole weight of her body backward, she managed to pry him off the gangster.

His hands felt empty without something to crush between them. Ganner shirked her off, spun on her, but she grabbed both his fists before he could bring them down.

"Dammit, Ganner, stop! This isn't you!"

He couldn't see her eyes but the choking in her voice stopped him. He'd never given into his rage like that, not in his life. He looked at both fists and opened them. Fragile fingers trembled until he clenched them again.

"This is no good," she told him. "We can take him back to Coruscant. Maybe get something more out of him."

"He doesn't know about Havok."

"He knows *something*. It's the best proof we have. Let's get to the spaceport and-

Suddenly laser blasts strafed above their heads. They threw themselves down on top of Uhlan's moaning form and watched a single airspeeder swoop down on them. Its searchlight blasted in their faces and voice called out, "Surrender now! Hands up!"

If these were Pleshchai's people, they were dead. Even local cops were probably in Black Sun's pocket. Ganner whispered to Azlyn, "Get the bike. Go."

"What about you?"

"I'll be right behind you."

"Ganner—"

"Go!" he shouted and reared to his feet, bringing Uhlan's blaster with him. As Azlyn threw herself onto the speeder bike and released the magnetic clamps, he fired madly at the speeder hovering above them. The response was a volley of laser blasts, one of which took him in the chest-plate and knocked all breath out of him.

Through the roaring in his ears Ganner heard Azlyn's bike whine to life. He felt for the handle to the passenger's door behind him, found it, and twisted. The door fell open and he fell further, plunging back-first into the night. As he dropped he instinctively searched for a calm center, and with it the Force he could use to slow his deadly fall.

But there was no Force, and no calm either. He felt a long moment of mindless panic as Ulahn's speeder shrunk to a tiny black box high above him, and it seemed ridiculous that this would be his final sight before oblivion.

Then something slammed into him, hard. Ganner felt pain explode in his side as he knocked against Azlyn's bike. She reached out and briefly grasped his hand at the wrist, nearly stopping his fall, but his weight was too much for her and he slipped from her grasp.

Ganner fell again. His body was angled almost upright now and he looked down to the ground just before he met it. His left foot impacted first and he heard bone shatter right before blinding pain took him. He was only vaguely aware as Azlyn pulled him onto the saddle of her speeder bike.

"Just hold on," she told him as she kicked the vehicle to motion, "We're getting the hell out of here."

He barely heard her, but he sensed that they were getting clear from danger. That was good, but he felt neither relief nor anything besides raw, brutal pain.

When Havok reported his discovery to Nihl, the Dark Lord was just as stunned, and just as certain that they needed to

get to the bottom of Saaraï's intentions on Coruscant. In truth they knew little about the young Chagrian. Darth Wyyrlok had trained her entirely by himself, and they had to assume she'd have learned her traitorous father's ability to manipulate and scheme.

Therefore, Havok had tasked his spies to follow her relentlessly. After several days the results were inconclusive. While Porat Derrol spent his time in the senate hall, his wife remained almost entirely in their apartment. She received several visitors per day, and while not all their identities had been verified, they seemed to be associated with other senators from the Alliance bloc, like the Senex sector's Nelloran and Bormea sector's Kaige. As yet, they'd been unable to tap into the apartment's communication line, but Havok doubted whether anything important passed through unencrypted. Whatever else Saaraï was, she'd be careful.

From the limited information they could gather, the Sith appeared to be fervently working behind-the-scenes to advance her husband's career and political causes. Havok knew there had to be more than that, but he saw no way to learn what.

After several days' indecision Havok knew he had to act. He'd become so used to Sith subterfuge that he didn't immediately consider a frontal approach. Once it seemed the best option, he mentally mapped several strategies before deciding on one that properly balanced truth and deceit.

Thus, when his spies told him that Derrol was leaving the senate building for home, Havok approached the apartment building in his speeder bike. Scouting the area with his macrobinoculars, he confirmed that the security operative staffing the parking garage at the tower's base was a mere droid, and so he'd affixed a high-grade sensor-scrambler to his bike that would cause the guard's photoreceptors to burst to static as long as he was within a twenty-meter range. If he'd had the Force Havok could have obtained the same effect, but mere technology sufficed.

Havok slipped his bike inside the garage without any problem and parked it in a shadowed corner. He stayed there and watched as several more speeders slipped through the ferrocrete maw after flashing identification for the guard

droid. He waited until the speeder he'd marked as Derrol's slipped through the gate, climbed up one level, and came to rest in its parking spot.

When the senator stepped out of his speeder and started for the entrance to the apartment complex, he jerked in visible shock at the sight before him: a middle-aged Iktotchi dressed in dour brown Jedi robes with a lightsaber dangling from his belt. Havok held his hands palms-out and unthreatening.

"Who are you?" Derrol hissed. His hands were frozen at his sides and he didn't seem poised to grab a weapon.

"I'm sorry if I surprised you, Senator." Havok did his best to affect a Jedi's manner, aloof and slightly indignant at being seen as a threat. "I'm Ektar Laes."

The senator's eyes darted to the lightsaber. "You're a Jedi? Really?"

Havok gave a benign smile and folded his hands over his stomach. "The Temple sent me to speak with you in private."

"You could have come to my office."

"I think you'll appreciate that this conversation is off-the-record."

"So you ambush me here? How'd you get past security?"

"Even without the Force, we have tools."

Derrol remained tense. "Make your point now, Jedi, or I *will* call security."

"Of course." The sound of another speeder coming in to park echoed through the garage. As it settled into a different aisle Havok stepped close and said, "I'm come to talk about your wife."

"What about my wife?"

"I'd like you to tell me what you know about her. Specifically, her life before the end of the war."

"Saarai was an orphan and a refugee. She's made no secret of that." He guarded his expression well. The Force would have revealed more, but Havok had to make do.

"How did you meet her?"

"After the war I volunteered for refugee relief programs. She was in one of the camps on Paqualis III."

"And she told you about her life early on?"

"Somewhat. She told me more after we'd become... involved. Master Jedi, what are you getting at?"

“Have you ever tried to verify her backstory? Locate any relatives she might have left?”

“No. Her entire family was wiped out by the Sith. She’d been on her own for some time and was looking to start a new life. Unless you’re suggesting something different.”

Havok felt a small flush of admiration. If Saara really had told Derrol these things, she’d said the truth in every word. “I think, Senator, she only told you what she needed you to hear.”

His face screwed tight. “Master Jedi, get to the point or I’ll call security right now.”

“Very well.” Havok gave a regretful sigh. “Senator, since the end of the war I’ve been working with other Jedi and Federation intelligence to track the remaining Sith in the galaxy. As you know they’ve gone to ground and come have become very adept at hiding themselves.”

“Are you telling me my wife is a Sith?” He looked appalled and incredulous, the way any honest husband would.

“Not just any Sith. We believe she’s the daughter of Darth Krayt’s right hand, Darth Wyyrlok. She would have received the best training the Sith could offer. Even without the Force she must be extremely dangerous, and there’s no telling how much communication she’s had with the other Sith.”

“This is absurd.” Derrol scowled. “What did I do to the Jedi that you’d come here and impugn my wife? If this is about Bavinyar I swear to everything holy I had nothing to do with it. I’ve said that over and over.”

He was getting angry and his voice carried in the echoing garage. Havok heard the slam of a speeder door and saw several humans emerge from a parked vehicle.

When they glanced in his direction he quickly turned his back to them and told Derrol, “The Jedi Council takes this matter extremely seriously. We came here to help you, Senator. We can take care of this before it become a scandal.”

“My wife is *not* a Sith.”

“Senator, when Darth Maladi’s virus spread across Coruscant eight months ago, did Saara show any reaction? Typically Force-users suffered a few hours of mild fever before losing connection with the Force. After that, her

behavior might have changed. Do you remember her acting usually around that time?

His stern expression faltered. "I... I'm not sure. Perhaps."

"Every night you spend with her is a danger. If you'd allow me to go up there with you now--"

"No. Absolutely not."

He'd expected the senator to be resolute and had planned several contingencies. One way or another, he'd flush Saara into the open and see what came of it.

"I understand if this is a shock," he said, "And you'll want time to consider. I came here to tell you because you have to know. When you're ready to talk- as early as tomorrow, ask to see Ahn Rasi Tuum from the Jedi Council. Tell him everything I've said about your wife. He'll know what to do." Niin's sources had told him the Cathar master was in charge of the Jedi's Sith-hunting efforts.

Derrol was still wary. "You could still be wrong about this."

"I wish I were. Senator, you can't let her even think you suspect. She's a Sith. She'll kill you at the first sign her cover's blown."

The Chagrian exhaled; the weight of the revelation was pressing down on him. He turned from Havok and bent over the edge of his speeder, hands against the frame.

"I've known her for almost three years," he said softly, as though to himself. "I loved her since the first time we met. I never imagined she could be a... a *Sith*."

"Her kind are insidious. They hide everywhere and strike us where we hurt most."

Derrol's head bent low. Quietly he said, "Master Jedi, I have to tell you something."

Havok stepped so close he could breathe on the Chagrian's neck. "Anything. I'm here to help."

The senator straightened and stood so his face was inches away. Something small and hard jabbed Havok in the stomach and Derrol snarled, "I know *exactly* what my wife is."

With its muzzle pressed into cloth and flesh, the little hold-out pistol barely made a sound as it went off. Havok gasped for breath as red agony spread out from his stomach across

his body. One hand groped for his lightsaber but Derrol grabbed it away. As Havok stumbled back, both hands now on his scorched side, the senator tracked him with the blaster.

“You’re not even a Jedi, are you? You’re a *Sith*. She said they’d come for her one day.”

This couldn’t be happening. Havok’s head swam; he was dimly aware that if Derrol had kept a bigger blaster he’d be dead already. The slam of another speeder door echoed through the garage and distracted the senator for just a second. Havok turned and ran.

He half-sprinted, half-staggered, both hands on his side like they were the only things holding in his gut. He barely noticed two pedestrians as he lurched past. Someone- maybe them, maybe Derrol- called for security. He ran back to his waiting speeder bike, threw himself on, and kicked it to motion. The thing nearly careered off a wall before he wrestled it under submission and sped for the garage’s exit.

He was on the ferrocrete portal in seconds. As Coruscant’s night beckoned outside two laser lasts whipped just over his head. A third caught his bike in the flank. The small vehicle couldn’t take that kind of damage; as soon as Havok shot out of the garage the bike’s repulsors started to fail. He tried to kick in engines but the whole thing shuddered. He was falling fast out of the sky, down into Coruscant’s bottomless canyons. If he’d had the Force he would have stifled the pain and lifted himself into the sky but he had nothing except a broken body and a broken bike. Havok saw an empty ledge jutting out into the canyon and aimed for it. His elevation kept dropping and he thought he’d smashed face-first into the building-side instead, but the repulsors sputtered just enough to buck him up onto the ledge.

The bike went skidding across the catwalk in a shower of sparks. Metal screamed against metal, twisted, and tore off in scraps. Havok was thrown and landed on his shoulder hard enough to break it. His body twisted and rolled side-over-side across the catwalk until, finally, it stopped.

Panting, dazed, nearly blinded with pain for two severe injuries, Havok rolled onto his back. Coruscant soared above him, but none of the light tracing lines high above dropped down onto him. No one was after him, not yet, but they

would be. He reached into his faux-Jedi robes for his comlink and found only cloth. With his one good hand he groped around for it but it was not there. No comlink, no blaster, no lightsaber; all he had were his damned binoculars. Havok couldn't call for help now; he only prayed the comm had fallen into the canyon and not in the garage, where it would be found and examined.

The only thing worse than raw pain was the shame of being so utterly outplayed. Leaning against the building wall for stead, Havok rose to his feet. Pain from his side spread out through his body and threatened to drop him into unconsciousness but he clung stubbornly to awareness. He had to hide. He had to heal. He had to get in contact with his people. He had to survive.

He didn't know how he could accomplish that without his tools, but he had to try. Fighting back pain and shame alike, Darth Havok staggered deeper into the shadows.

Chapter Nineteen

Getting from the Kathol sector to Tython was no easy task, and when *Mynock* exited hyperspace to find the planet sitting dead ahead, lonely among the Deep Core's tight-packed stars and swirling stellar gasses, Jariah Syn felt anything but satisfied. A quick swing around the planet and sensor sweep showed absolutely nothing of note: no spacecraft in orbit, no activity on the surface. It was a dead and ancient world, but there was something hiding here that Jariah could never understand, and that was enough for him to hate it.

The entire team was packed into the cockpit this time, and Jariah watching over Cade's shoulder as his friend guided *Mynock* into lower orbit and performed another sweep. Deliah paid close attention to the feed coming through the sensors, and everyone else waited with shallow breath for her to report some revelation.

It took a while- so long Jariah was starting to hope they'd find nothing and hightail it back to civilization- but eventually she said, "I think we've got something."

"What kind of something?" asked Cade.

"There's a big object on the northern continent. It looks like a pyramid, a couple hundred meters on either side. Way more intact than any of the other ruins we've picked up."

"Okay. Send me coordinates and we'll take a look. Any sign of current activity?"

"Not that I can see. Bring us closer."

"We should prep shields and weapons just in case," Jao said.

After the fight at Sebiris, nobody blamed him for being skittish. Deliah complied while Cade pushed them into the atmosphere. The group waited in silent anticipation as *Mynock* soared low over an expanse of plains and ridges lightly dusted white and shining bright under a clear sky. The black pyramid on the horizon was hard to miss, and Cade decelerated as they approached the site.

He swung *Mynock* around to get them a better view. The pyramid was set in the center of a broad circular pit, its edges piled high with mounds of dirt and sediment. Jariah realized it was an excavation pit, the kind archaeologists dug up, and as the ship dropped altitude he saw the pyramid wasn't a pyramid at all, but some eight-sided monolith still stuck halfway into the ground. The artificial construct, made from a black stone-like substance, was massive, the size of a medium star cruiser, and while Jariah couldn't see any visible means of propulsion, its dual-pyramid shape suggested that it might be a mobile structure rather than one built on foundations.

While all the ex-Force-users stared at the monolith in quiet awe, Jariah's attention went elsewhere. He didn't see any excavation tools in the pit itself; Khat Lah and his people must have been thorough cleaning up. He did spot a large patch of visible soil, just beyond the rim, where brown showed through the white. He didn't know what that meant, but it stood out against an otherwise snow-draped landscape and needed investigating.

Cade set *Mynock* down about twenty meters away, on another spot outside the rim. "Okay, everybody out," he said. "Bundle up first. It's cold outside."

That was it; he said nothing on the monolith, even though Jao, Kyra, and Lowbacca were all staring at him, wordlessly asking if he'd picked up anything with his Force-powers. Cade's silence was the only answer they got. The three of them left the cockpit first to go get their coats, followed by a shuffling C-3PO. R2-D2, who'd been plugged into *Mynock*'s nav computer to help them through the Deep Core, removed himself from the access socket and hooted a question.

Cade patted the droid's dome. "Yeah, you should come too. We're gonna need all the tools we've got, I figure."

The droid whistled appreciatively and followed Cade out of the cockpit, leaving Jariah and Deliah behind. They were two of the kind on this trip, here because of Cade and nothing else. Jariah asked her, "Well, what do you think?"

She gave him a weird look. "I think it's big and old and probably full of *grancha* Force power or something. Don't know how that's gonna help them, though. Khat Lah's not here."

"No, but he put in a lot of work into digging up this thing." Jariah glanced out the viewport at that black artificial mountain. He usually wasn't big on reverence or awe, but there was something in that ancient construct that compelled, at least, respect. "This is way bigger than us, isn't it?"

"Always had been, *pateesa*. I'm just in it to watch Cade's back while he does his Jedi stuff." She shrugged and moved out of the cockpit.

As he followed, Jariah asked, "Hey, you notice that dry patch coming in?"

"You mean the spot cleared of snow?" Deliah glanced over her shoulder as they walked to the crew lounge. "Yeah, I don't think anybody else did though. Not even Cade. He was all about that... thing."

"You think he felt anything through the Force?"

"I'm an empath, Jariah, not a mind-reader. You'll have to ask him."

"Yeah, well, Cade's playing it close nowadays."

He tried not to sound sour. Cade didn't have that sullen anger he'd had in the bad old days, before he'd revealed his full past, but he was pulling in on himself again. Losing his mother and becoming overnight the last Jedi in the galaxy had piled on new burdens, and Cade had never been good at sharing those.

Jariah ducked into his cabin to grab his coat and, just to be safe, a pair of blasters. By the time he got down to the hold the broad loading doors were open and cold breeze was swirling in. He joined Deliah at the back of the group as they stepped out onto Tython's surface. Cade took the lead, R2-D2 rolling with him and the group of Force-users clustered behind them. They marched over the pit's rim toward the monolith as though entranced.

Rather than follow their footprints through the snow, Jariah tugged Deliah's. "Hey, let's take a look at that patch. They can handle.... whatever that thing is."

Deliah looked reluctant- she wanted to keep an eye on Cade, of course- but she nodded and joined Jariah. They took long steps across the bright sunny snowfield until they reached the spot where dirt showed through.

As he stepped into the center of the patch, Jariah got a bad feeling. This was a space big enough to fit a small spacecraft in, and one kicking off on repulsors could definitely push out enough hot air to melt the thin layer of snow. Deliah had the same idea; she dropped to her knees and began searching the cold packed dirt for impact marks.

Jariah found one first. It was a big rectangular indentation, maybe a meter long and a half-meter wide, just the right size for a starship landing strut. As he called out what he'd found to Deliah, she said she'd found another.

"Any idea how long ago these were made?" Jariah asked, stamping a foot atop one indentation.

"Who knows?" Deliah looked up at the clear sky. "No idea how often it snows here."

"Best we knew, Khat Lah was on this planet... what, over a year ago? These marks've gotta be fresher than that."

"Maybe he came back. Maybe he saw us coming, collapsed his tent, and ran to hide somewhere."

"Could be. Or these could be from somebody else's ship."

There was no way to know for sure. After Sebiris he couldn't shake the idea that the attack had been more than a random raid. He had absolutely no proof this was connected; all Jariah knew was that he definitely had a bad feeling about this.

The low ridges that rippled the plain near the monolith provided a few places to hide.

Eli and Darth Talon hadn't been given much warning; when their relay satellite in orbit informed them that a ship had entered the system, they'd scrambled to pick up their own shuttle and fly it into a crevasse some fifty kilometers away, where it would be shielded from orbital eyes. After that they'd hurriedly backtracked using on their speeder bike, not

knowing but assuming the newcomer was coming for the black monolith.

They now lay flat on the crest of one hill nearly a kilometer from the site, but the air was clear and they watched with macrobinoculars as the familiar red freighter descended from the sky and came down to land. Eli had been worried that they'd be spotted from above, even though Talon had draped their bodies and the speeder bike under white blankets to match the snow. Once Skywalker and his companions began stepping out, he wondered whether the Jedi might be able to sense them in the Force, distant as they were. Thankfully, his attention seemed to be focused entirely on the black pyramid.

Eli counted Skywalker's party carefully. He recognized almost all of them from the hunt for Darth Maladi last year: Skywalker himself, his human and Zeltron friends, the Imperial Knight Jao Assam, tall and ginger-furred Lowbacca. He even recognized the two droids rocking across the uneven terrain: one pale astromech and one golden protocol droid. There was a single unfamiliar figure.

"Do you recognize the woman?" he asked as he peered at the tiny form, marked by long dark hair twirling in the wind.

"I do not," Talon said as she looked through her own binoculars. "The rest.... Are familiar."

She sounded far from pleased to see Skywalker, which wasn't surprising, given how thoroughly the Jedi had humiliated them on their last encounter. For his part, Eli was almost glad Skywalker had come. For days he and Talon had examined the thing to no avail. They'd scoured the entire monolith exterior for a point of entry but found none. They'd tried to carve through the black stone surface and found their lightsabers totally ineffective. They certainly didn't have the equipment to further dig this giant construct out of the earth. The monolith was giant and unyielding, and Eli had become steadily convinced that only one who wielded the Force could command a response from it.

He kept his focus on Skywalker. The blond-haired man led his group to the monolith, and for a long minute he simply craned his neck back and looked at its peak. Eli felt a stab of envy to think how he might be communicating with this ancient device through the Force, but after the minute ended

Skywalker looked back to his colleagues and shrugged, as though he knew no more than they.

The group spread out slightly. The young woman and Lowbacca went up to touch the device with bare hands; perhaps they'd been expecting revelation just like Eli. As they stepped away, disappointed, the astromech surprised by shooting upward on small rocket-jets in its dual legs. The droid flew over the monolith's midsection and onto its top half, but stopped before ascending the pyramid's upward slant.

Skywalker flew into the air as well, jumping with an invisible push from the Force. The others stepped back to watch as he moved carefully toward his droid, arms slightly spread to keep balance on the stone slope. He crouched next to the astromech and stayed there, as though conversing with it, before straightening.

Skywalker turned his attention upslope, perhaps toward the peak or perhaps toward the eight-spoked wheel that had been carved into the monolith's side. Eli had no idea what sort of blade could have made those indentations; whoever or whatever had created this structure possessed tools beyond either Jedi or Sith.

It took Skywalker several minutes to climb up to the eight-spoked wheel. He moved carefully, sometimes bending to hands and knees to ascend the slope on four limbs. All the others stayed behind to watch him as he got higher and further away. Finally he reached the carved wheel and came to rest inside the bottom spoke. He turned around and seemed to call something down to the others, but it was lost in distance and wind.

Then a light seemed to crack out of the stone behind him. Eli watched as the light grew from the bottom edge of the spoke, filling the space until it became a human-sized portal of glowing white directly in front of Skywalker.

The man turned and stared into the light, lifting one hand over his eyes to block some of the glare. The ones on the ground were calling to him, maybe telling him to come back. Skywalker didn't seem to notice. His body tipped forward, then fell through the portal and disappeared into the light.

And then, as suddenly as it had come, the portal shrunk, the black stone door closed, and the light was gone, leaving no trace of the Jedi who'd been pulled inside.

Cade Skywalker fell into eternity.

Planets and moons, stars and stardust, the vastness of galaxy whipped past him, too fast to understand. He plunged through interstellar void but he felt neither vacuum cold nor inertial rush. He seemed to have no body at all, only awareness overloaded by a torrent of time and space, and he somehow understood that he was not dropping into the cosmos but the cosmos was gushing into him, overwhelming his consciousness with knowledge no human mind could grasp.

He would have screamed, but he had no mouth. He had nothing to grab onto and no hands to arrest his fall. Cade tried to huddle against the torrent and focus on himself alone. He tried to recall Deliah's touch and smell, his father's gentle smile, guarded concern in his mother's eye. He could focus on them for an instant but then they slipped away. He was fraying apart, pulled in too many directions by the infinite rush of the universe.

And then, suddenly, the universe stopped.

Cade found himself again and took a timeless moment to cling to all the things and people who had made him. Then he dared focus on the things without. He felt all the endless stars and planets moving around him still, but he could no longer see them in his mind's eye. Instead he was surrounded by white. The white had no beginning and no end. It was as deep as interstellar black and he was suspended in it, helpless and motionless.

Then a voice that was not a voice spoke to him without speech. It said, *What is your name?*

He remembered himself and all that had made him. He found himself speaking without words. *I'm Cade Skywalker.*

And in that voiceless voice he sensed understanding. *You are the Chosen One*, it said. There was a person behind the voice; gentle, curious. Female, he thought, but couldn't know why. All around him was white.

I'm not the Chosen One, he said. *That was Anakin Skywalker. My ancestor.*

To be a Skywalker is to shift the balance of the Force. Therefore, you are still the Chosen One.

I'm really not. I'm just a guy, he insisted, though it had never really been true, not in all his life. Because he needed to understand he asked, *Who are you?*

For another timeless moment his response was only the white. Then form merged from void and a vision appeared before him: a body with shape hidden by loose green cloak, exposing only a smooth young female's face and twin grey Twi'lek *lekku*. In her black-gloved hands she clutched an eight-sided object shaped like two pyramids joined at the base. Like the monolith on Tython. Like, he realized, the bigger monolith around Mortis he'd seen in file holos from the Jedi archives.

Who are you? Cade repeated.

I was Tasha Ryo, the Twi'lek spoke to him, though her mouth did not move. Her head was lifted, blue eyes staring past him into the white.

Are you a Jedi?

I am Je'daii, she replied, and somehow he sensed the difference. *Before the Jedi ever were.*

When? he asked. *When were you from?*

Time has no meaning in the Force, she said, *and none in the Tho Yor.*

He recalled the great black pyramid islanded in a snowfield and the bright portal that had opened before him. It felt a galaxy away. *Tho Yor? Is that what this place is? What does that mean?*

Let me show you, Tasha Ryo said.

Cade felt the white begin the fade and the cosmos rush in on him again.

Wait, he cried, *Hold up, not again!*

Let me show you the dawn of the Je'daii.

The white disappeared. Time and space attacked him. Images swirled around, each one stamping itself on his awareness. A great black monolith shaped like joined pyramids, a Tho Yor, rose above a world of lush jungles. Another sunk into bottomless depths. Another rested amidst

icy mountains and another on barren plain. Cade understood instantly and without reason that there were all different monoliths on different worlds.

He saw white doors open in each Tho Yor. He saw living beings file inside: humans, Twi'leks, Wookiees, Zabraks, Noghri, Cathar, and more. He saw the Tho Yor lift off from their planetbound resting places and soar swiftly through the cosmos, gathering more and more beings as they went.

It was a time before hyperspace, when the young civilizations were scattered in isolation across the galaxy, Tasha Ryo told him as more imaged swarmed by. Different Tho Yor converged and joined together above a familiar world circled by twin moons, one light, the other dark.

You brought them here, Cade said. *You gathered them all to train in the Force.*

I did nothing, she replied. *The Tho Yor collected those who could touch the Force and brought them together here, on Tython, so the Je'daii order could be born.*

Then who created the Tho Yor? Who created the Jedi?

Patience, Tasha gently chided. *Watch.*

More images filled his awareness. He saw life on Tython in the ancient days, where beings of so many races trained together in the ways of the Force. They built great temples all across the planet. He saw one made of eight cyclopean rectangular stones arranged around a blue pool. Another looked like three-armed spider suspended by curved metal legs over a great black-bottomed chasm. In all these placed the Je'daii studied and trained beneath the Tho Yor. Generations lived and died, lived and died. They created a civilization that lasted in isolation for millennia, so long that they forgot their own origins.

And then: devastation. Cade didn't just see flashes of fire and destruction, he felt the pain of thousands dying and the dark, angry desperation of those who fought to survive.

What is this? he asked. *What are you showing me?*

Suddenly the images shuddered to a halt. He saw a gray-skinned Twi'lek in green robes: the Tasha Ryo who communicated with him now. She stood on a promontory, overlooking a field of battle. Beings of many species fought below, wielding lightsabers against an army of larger aliens

with broad fierce mouths lined by pointed teeth and eyes jetting out on stalks from either side of their heads. These were invaders, come from across the galaxy to conquer secluded Tython.

I was a Je'daii seer when the Rakata came to Tython, she told him. I was no warrior. There was little I could do except watch those stronger than me hold back their tide. Or so I thought.

Another image: Tasha Ryo stood beside another Je'daii, this one a Zabrak. She clutched the eight-sided object in both hands and Cade realized it was a holocron when he saw an image of a cloaked figure appear before it. He couldn't tell what it was saying, but as it spoke to Tasha he could feel the Twi'lek woman fill with bleak determination.

He saw the woman jump into a shaft of light. He saw the light consume her and saw her soft, wise smile as her physical body dissolved and what was left of her joined the Force and became one with the Tho Yor, timeless and eternal, connected to the cosmic Force and every corner of the universe.

It was knowledge no mortal mind could handle. Cade felt himself fraying apart again, but the torrent stopped and he was back amidst the white, without form or substance, seemingly floating before the lingering image of Tasha Ryo as she'd been in death, Tasha Ryo as she'd been preserved in the Force these many millennia.

I gave myself to the Tho Yor and became the Tho Yor, she said.

Why? he asked.

Because the Tho Yor needed to awaken to save Tython.

More images flashed on him. Black double-pyramids rose into the air and spewed destructive energy, but it was not the hungry chaos of the dark side. Rather it was the Force in its purest form, strong and bright, and it blasted away the Rakata and their warships. With her sacrifice and a flash of light, the Je'daii had been saved from the invaders' galaxy-spanning empire.

Is that what these Tho Yor are? Cade asked, *A weapon?*

They are so much more. We must go back.

And they went back. Everything he'd seen played out before him in reverse. The Rakata retreated, the Je'daii trained, the Tho Yor scattered across the galaxy. And, eons before that, the Tho Yor converged on the place from which they'd been born. The black-stone double pyramids, each the size of a small mountain, were dwarfed by the giant monolith around which they gathered. Its shape was the same but its sides were smooth, devoid of the eight-spoked wheel stamped on each Tho Yor, but marked by red lines, faintly glowing.

I've seen this before, Cade said. This is Mortis.

Mortis was where it began, Tasha said.

More images, flashing fast. He saw a landscape of mountains and ridges and barren trees that seemed to glow with inner life. He saw a dark chasm around a lake of fire through which virulent darkness surged. He saw a great castle rising from a mountain peak. Three figures stood at a balcony, looking out at Tho Yor half-faded in the sky. One was a young woman, ethereal and light. Another was a young man, dark and brooding. The third was an old bearded man, and though they said no words Cade knew the old man thought on his children behind him with foreboding and the Tho Yor in the sky with pride. He knew the old man had created them all.

The Father prized balance, Tasha Ryo told him. He knew the Rakata were marshalling darkness across the galaxy, and he knew something was needed to counter them. Everyone else of his kind had abandoned the physical plane to become wills within the Living Force. Thus he created the Tho Yor, spread them across the galaxy, and gathered those who could feel the Force to Tython, where they honed themselves into a new order that would keep the scales between light and dark even.

The Father, the Son, and the Daughter, Cade said. I heard about this from my dad. I thought it was just a myth. A metaphor.

A powerful enough metaphor is its own truth.

But they're gone. Mortis is a dead world now, and the Ones-

Are destroyed, Tasha said.

Another torrent came. He saw the Father, Son, and Daughter endure for many eons, timeless with the Force within the isolating shell of the Mortis monolith. Sometimes they received mortal visitors, ones Cade could not recognize, until finally the rush came to a shuddering halt at the sight of man he'd seen in his own Force-visions. Anakin Skywalker, the Chosen One, stood before the ancient Ones on the patterned floor of a vast and empty, facing their inscrutable judgement.

Even they were not timeless, Tasha Ryo said. They beseeched the Chosen One to intervene and keep the balance. He refused.

The Daughter fell to the Son's blade. The Father and the Son, together, stood impaled on Anakin's saber. The light of Mortis dimmed and died, but in the gloom one image remained: a stone throne, sitting empty on an empty dais.

Then the white returned, and Tasha Ryo.

Even now, she said, Skywalkers retain the balance.

It was the weight of destiny again, and Cade instinctively revolted. *I just did what I had to, lady. I've never cared about balance.*

But you keep it nonetheless, as all Skywalkers have. It's what you were made for.

He remembered Maladi's rambling speech on Te Hasa, minutes before her death. She'd told him that Anakin, and thus all Skywalkers, had been born of the Force itself to act as the Force's agent in response to the dark manipulations of the Sith. The idea repulsed him; even after all Cade had been through he wanted to believe his will and choices were his own.

These Ones, did they create the Skywalkers? Did the Father make us to create balance?

A timeless moment drew on with no reply. Then she said, *No. The Force has deeper roots.*

Even now, in whatever formless timeless state he was in, things refused to make themselves clear. *What are you talking about? What roots? These Ones, I thought they controlled the Force, kept the balance...*

They tried. Since their death, the galaxy has become wracked by war and imbalance. Some Skywalkers have

tipped it to the dark. Others have corrected it. It's a role you have all played. Don't you agree?

He couldn't argue. *But what created Anakin? If it wasn't the Ones that pushed back against the Sith then who? What?*

Another white moment, and then she said, *The Ones stayed behind to watch over the galaxy. The others went ahead.*

Went ahead to where?

Into the Force. They surrendered their crude bodies and became one with it, as did I. Even now they guide it. It was from these wills that Skywalkers were born.

What assailed him next wasn't images. It was knowledge. Without a mouth he couldn't scream; he could only take in the agonizing rush of space and time, backwards from this galaxy now soaked in silence to a distant era where beings he could never comprehend strode like gods across the galaxy, arranging star systems like children's toys and wielding the Force as pure extension of will. Though he couldn't wrap his mind around their physical or mental forms he knew these were the Celestials of legends. More knowledge came of the races they'd enslaved: warlike Rakata, wise Sharu, industrious Killiks, peaceful Kwa and artful Gree. As with the Celestials, the Force was a natural part of them, and all were linked together in it. They travelled the galaxy on great portals that leaped across lightyears and there was nothing they could not do.

And then the gods departed. Dissolving into the Force, they left the physical galaxy behind save for the three who'd lingered within the Mortis monolith, guiding the new civilizations after the old ones fell, creating the Tho Yor and gathering the Je'daii on Tython to create a new order that would bring down the Rakata, and all other who waged darkness. At the same time, the Force powers that had once been spread across every living being in the galaxy withered and died, leaving individuals isolated in themselves. Without the Force, the civilizations of the Celestials' slaves began to die, leaving a great gap into which humans and other species would spring out and populate the stars.

But something of the ones who'd gone ahead remained. Cade received another vision of a planet glowing bright as any star, walled on all sides by the stellar gasses and tight-

packed suns of the Deep Core. The world was a beacon of life; it sang in the Force and emanated raw power. On its barren surface he saw one ancient arch that recalled the ruined hypergate he'd seen on Sebiris.

The Rakata came to Tython seeking something to restore their failing grasp of the Force, said Tasha Ryo. They saw the ruins of the ancient Kwa infinity gate beneath the Je'daii's old city and thought this was the planet their prophecies claimed could restore their power. They were wrong.

What is this place you're showing me? Where is it?

Locked away at the heart of the galaxy. Many thousands of years ago, before the stars constricted, it was passable, but not longer. This was a place from which the wills departed.

Whose wills? I don't understand.

They are the Whills, she told him, stressing the word clearly. Those who surrendered space and time and voluntarily merged their life-essence with the Cosmic Force. In ascending they guide and direct it, now and ever and always.

Cade strove for something he could comprehend. *The gate, why are you showing me the gate? Is that what you showed him?*

Tasha understood. *What I show you now, I showed the one called Khat Lah.*

Finally, something made sense. *Then he's trying to rebuild a hypergate so he can get to this planet. I get that, I understand, but where did you send him?*

She said, *He is already there.*

Before Cade could ask anything, Tasha disappeared and so did the visions. He plunged into infinity once more. His awareness was overwhelmed by planets and moons, stars and singularities, pulsars and quasars and stellar dust. He felt himself fraying again; even the wisdom Tasha had just imparted seemed to slip away like sand through fingers. He was being pulled apart by too much truth.

When the rush receded his awareness focused on a single solar system. It seemed walled by darkness and he knew it was at the very edge of the galactic rim. At its heart he saw two stars swirling around each other, one white, the other blue. Bodiless and timeless, he travelled through its void,

passing three lifeless planets- a blue gas giant, a red one, a single dead gray rock- before finding a small planet draped in forests. It was strange and ghostly in the blue-white light of its dual suns.

Vision fell toward the planet, faster and faster. Continents rushed up to meet him. Suddenly he saw it: the empty arch of an ancient hypergate, relic of departed gods, forgotten at the galaxy's edge for too many eons to count. Vision rushed toward the arch's center. A grid of light appeared and the vision rushed into it, no matter how hard Cade tried to stop it. He plunged into light beyond understanding and finally, at last, the fraying edges of himself tore free, twirled away, and dissolved in white.

When the portal in the monolith opened and Cade fell inside, Jariah didn't move, didn't speak. He watched it like it was a dream, unreal, but when the door slammed shut and Cade disappeared, the enormity of what happened staggered him like a blow.

Everyone else was shocked too, but Deliah was the first to move. She sprinted to the base of the monolith and called, "Artoo, get up there! See what happened to him! Now!"

The droid whistled and rose up on his leg-jets. Jariah joined Deliah and the others as they stared up, helpless and silent. Even C-3PO seemed stunned beyond words. R2-D2 set himself to hover at the bottom of the eight-spoked wheel, and Jariah squinted to see the droid extend an instrument one of its arms and examine the monolith's surface. After a moment the droid whistled something else, half-lost in the wind.

C-3PO understood perfectly. "Artoo says that the surface of the monolith is completely fused. That is to say, he can find no seam and no door."

"What do you mean no door?" Jariah snapped. "We just saw him go through!"

"I understand, Master Jariah. Artoo's sensors must be malfunctioning. I can think of no other explanation."

"We need to get up there, now." Deliah glared at the overhang. It loomed almost ten meters above their heads, unreachable to anyone without the Force or jet boosters.

"I'll go back to the ship," Jao offered. "There's got to be a grappling hook somewhere, of a fiberchord gun."

"I know where it is," Jariah said, and he started for *Mynock* in a sprint.

He barely got five steps before Deliah called at his back. He stopped, spun around, and saw the white portal had reopened. R2-D2 hovered to one side as Cade's familiar form appeared, silhouetted against the monolith's inner light. He seemed to stand there, arms outstretched, and Jariah thought he was trying to tell them something.

Then the wind blew and Cade pitched forward like a tipped mannequin. He hit the black slope and began rolling down. The portal closed behind him and R2-D2 tweeted frantically as he shot down after Cade. Still powered by his leg-jets, the astromech shot a mechanical claw out from his barreled body and grabbed hold of Cade's trailing jacket. That stopped his tumble but not his fall, and R2 wailed as he was dragged after Cade, further downslope.

Cade finally stopped tumbling when he reached the bottom of the pyramid. The droid nudged him carefully over the edge and Lowbacca was there to catch the smaller human in both arms. The Wookiee lowered him the ground as everyone else gathered around. Deliah dropped to her knees, gathered her head in his lap and stroked his face.

"C'mon, Cade, baby, wake up," she muttered. "Come back to us, come on."

Jariah bent closer and stared into his friend's face. His eyes were closed but his eyelids twitched, as though he was lost in dream. His limbs stirred too, very slightly. Jariah bent low and gave him one light slap on the face, then a harder one, but he remained limp in Deliah's arms, lost behind closed eyes.

Wherever Cade was now, he was far, far away.

Chapter Twenty

The great entry doors to the repulsorlift factory outside Salis D'aar were spread wide, and a thousand people were filing out into Bakura's noon light. After days kept as hostages inside the factory they shambled wearily ahead, squinting into the sun their faces grew soft with relief. Some of them had never expected to see the sky again.

Shado Vao felt a flush of pride as he watched them move. The sun shone down on his head too, warming his scalp and lekku. He stood at the open gate that warded the factory grounds, and though two human security guards stood on either side of him he felt he was in no danger. Vlothaw and his P'w'eck could have hurt him at any time while he was in the factory as their voluntary hostage. In the end he'd convinced them to let him go, along with all of the human hostages and the most valuable prize of all.

As the tail of the hostage column marched through the gate, Vlothaw's final relinquishment left the factory. Four P'w'eck ringed by a full dozen human security guards plodded along, tasting the air with flicking tongues but betraying no emotion Shado could read.

These, Vlothaw had said, were the ones who'd passed HIMS technology to the Ssi-ruuk. He'd presented some evidence as well, though it would take time for neutral investigators to verify it. Help promised by the Federation had yet to arrive, which meant a final resolution for the standoff was still far away, but what the P'w'eck had done today was an unmistakable sign of goodwill. Shado knew that most of it was his doing, and though it may not have

been Jedi-like, he allowed himself to indulge in pride for what he'd accomplished. Even without touching the Force he was still working its will.

Once the captive P'w'eck were loaded into a secure airspeeder and whisked away, Shado got into another vehicle and allowed the guards to take him to the presidential pyramid on the other side of Salis D'aar. Flying high in bright daylight, he could see the P'w'eck districts marked by scars of violence and the security vehicles forming rings around them. The city was still halfway under siege, and it was a sobering reminder that while progress had been made, they still had a long way to go.

When Shado entered the president's office he took it as a good sign that General Koregion, Bakura's bullish defense chief, was absent. Instead there was merely President Recado and Geral Storr. Both were on their feet, and they greeted Shado with warm handshakes.

"Getting those hostages released is a major step, Master Jedi," said Storr. "You're to be commended."

"Surprised?" Shado gave him a tight smile.

The Imperial looked slightly humbled. "It was a dangerous undertaking. I'm glad it's paid off, for now."

Always the qualifier. "When will the Federation team get here?"

"They're due within six hours."

"In the meantime," Recado said, "Our investigators will start looking into those P'w'eck we've been handed. Not to be callous, but they're even more valuable than the thousand hostages."

He was likely right. "The P'w'eck are still waiting on restitution for their own losses. Vlothaw made it very clear he won't leave the factories until he's got them."

"That could take days. Weeks. The damage to our economy is already dire. We need to get those factories producing again."

"Once the team for Coruscant arrives," said Storr, "They'll do everything they can to expedite matters."

In other words, Shado thought, they'd make certain Bakura remained a viable link in the supply chain. He didn't begrudge anyone for the economics of wartime, but it was a

reminder why the Jedi had always been reluctant to wed themselves tightly to any government.

The door to Recado's office slid open and Koregion marched in on long fast strides. The sight of him was disappointing but not unexpected. The general gave Shado a curt nod. "Congratulations on your efforts."

"Thank you," Shado nodded back.

Recado crossed arms over his chest. "Master Jedi, you spent a long time in that factory. We're going to need you to recount what happened, every step of the way."

He'd expected them to plumb him for intelligence, but he was mildly surprised it was happening in the president's office. Nonetheless, he did as requested, describing how he'd been taken through the factory into the observation room overlooking a mess hall packed with prisoners.

"I didn't get to see much," he added. "I'm sure that was intentional. So I can't say to how the P'w'eck are spread out inside."

"But you spoke to Vlothaw repeatedly," Recado said. "What did you get from him?"

It was a vague question. With the Force Shado might have had an answer; instead he took a guess. "I think he's in a difficult situation and he's trying to deal with it as best as he can. He's doing everything for his people but he never struck me as a radical."

Koregion snorted. "How would you describe his actions, then?"

"I think he, and the P'w'eck as a whole, see them as self-defense."

"They're the ones who collaborated with the Ssi-ruuk. We can't forget that."

"They're cooperating with us now. Why else would Vlothaw hand over four of his own?"

"To stall us or throw us off the real culprits," Storr said, thoughtful rather than accusing.

"Maybe. But you asked my opinion. I don't think he wants this to end in blood. None of us do."

"We've started making a path," Recado said. "We'll follow along it for a time and see where it gets us. But we need to travel faster than we are now."

"Until we *do* get to our destination," said Koregion, "We need to keep the factories surrounded and the P'w'eck districts secure. And we need to keep our soldiers on standby."

The sight of all those security vehicles in Salis D'aar had made Shado uncomfortable, and he hoped that some might be withdrawn with a relaxing of tensions. He and Koregion both stared at Recado; the president shirked and looked away.

"General, keep your men in place for now. Including the ones in the cities. It's as much for the P'w'eck's protection as anything else."

"Yes, Mister President."

"In the meantime," Storr said, "What do you need from myself and Master Vao?"

Recado considered. A buzzer went off at his desk and the man walked over to tap on his comm system. "This is the president. Speak."

"Mister President, this is Lieutenant Envis. We've just received a hail from orbital control," the young voice said. "They've picked up new arrivals from hyperspace."

Six hours early, Shado thought, and gave Storr an encouraged look.

When the young man didn't continue, Recado pressed, "Well, Lieutenant? Out with it."

"Sir, we have over twenty ships in orbit. They're Ssi-ruuk."

Rather than show shock or anger, the president closed his eyes and exhaled. Koregion bent over the desk and said urgently, "Lieutenant, this is General Koregion. Are our defensive screens up?"

"Yes, General. Our defenders in orbit are angling to intercept, but there's so many of them, sir, and they're spread out wide. It looks like a standard siege pattern. They haven't moved to engage yet and they haven't broadcast any signals."

"Understood. Have all ships hold the line and do not fire unless fired upon. I'm on my way to headquarters now."

"Yes, sir. Understood, sir,"

Koregion closed the link and told Recado, "You should come with me, Mister President."

The old man drew himself up. "Yes. Let's get going."

They started for the door without a word to the ambassadors. Shado called, "We'll come with you."

The general glared at him. "Haven't you done enough damage?"

"What do you mean?"

"If it weren't for your negotiating we could have sent troops a day ago and seized those factories. Vlothaw was *using* you, Jedi. He was using you to stall us so his Ssi-ruuk friends could get here."

It was such a stunning thought Shado struggled for something to say. He looked to Storr for support but the ambassador had gone stony. He'd neither confirm nor deny the accusation.

Koregion and Recado hurried from the room. Storr joined them and Shado, still shocked beyond words, followed in their wake.

When Sora Auch's commandos had taken the tibanna refinery platform they'd charged inside to quickly disable its crew and seize key locations. The fast-strike approach had succeeded in its initial goal but they'd left themselves open to an attack from the rear. Now that they'd taken the facility, and Sora's people with it, Marin's team was determined not to make the same mistake. They were burrowing in for a siege.

The doors from the landing platforms into the refinery itself had been barricaded waist-high with supply crates. Tripod canons had been dragged out of the *Bottom Line* and mounted at each entry point, and sharpshooters had been placed at several windows looking onto the platform. What really unnerved Ania, though, were the detonite charges that had been placed on the outer shells of half the tibanna gas tanks on platforms' outer edges. Blowing just a few of those would be enough to knock the platform from the sky. Exploding all those charges at once would instantly incinerate everything and everyone.

It was clear to Ania that her mother wasn't just readying for a siege, she was preparing for a last stand. For the past months she'd learned a lot about Marin's ruthless means and

obsession with bringing down Yaga Auchs, but her actions on Bepin still surprised her. Marin had seemed determined to orchestrate Auchs' downfall in a controlled fashion and see that justice was done without ruining more lives than necessary. Now she was ready to destroy herself and most of her people, maybe even her own daughter. The fact that she was using Auchs' own child as bait was stomach-turning.

As expected, Marin was too busy giving orders to make time for Ania. She finally managed to pin her mother down in the processing plant at the south end, the same room with the tall central pillar where she'd first seen her mother plunge from the highest platform and pin Yaga Auchs' daughter to the floor.

Sora Auchs was still there. Her helmet was off but the rest of her armor was on, and they had her hands-bound and on her knees midway between the pillar and the entryway. Two Mandalorians- she thought one was Yangar Skirata- lay on the elevated platform behind her, ready to pump a blaster bolt into her or if she moved.

When Ania stepped inside the room, Sora met her eyes and held them. They were dark eyes on a young face framed by dark hair. There wasn't anger in those eyes, or imploring, just a veiled curiosity, as though she were wondering what this unmasked, un-Mando woman was doing here.

Those eyes unsettled her and Ania turned away. Her mother was in the far corner, scouring the tableau like a director evaluating the stage before her play. Marin looked at everything but Ania until her daughter was right beside her.

"Hondo just sent a message to Auchs," Marin said. "He spoke to him directly and told him we have his daughter. He's on his way down to negotiate."

"And then what?" Marin gestured to the large room and the small figure kneeling on the floor. "What do you expect he'll do? Surrender? Admit what he did so everyone can hear?"

"I've tried for *years* to get proof. It doesn't exist because the Sith wouldn't let it. I waited too now long and now both of them- Auchs *and* the Sith- are wrecking the galaxy *again*. Enough is enough. I'm stopping it. Today."

"How? By blowing yourself up?" Ania gripped her arm. The *beskar* plates were unyielding beneath her fingers.

"I'm ending it any way I can," Marin said, staring hard at Sora's lonely figure. From the cold in her voice, Ania didn't doubt her mother was ready to die.

She felt her own throat go dry. "Is this the justice you were talking about? It seems more like murder-suicide to me."

"No one is here who doesn't want to be," Marin said, voice brittle. "I've told most of our people to get off the platform and wait in the clouds."

Ania looked at Sora's kneeling figure and knew her mother's words a lie. "So what if you blow up Auchs here? The Sith are still out there, and the Nagai and Ssi-ruuk and all Auchs' lieutenants. You're not going to accomplish *anything* like this."

Marin jerked her arm free. "I'll accomplish what I should have forty years ago."

Forty years ago, Ania thought with a chill, she'd shown mercy to young Yaga Auchs after killing his father. Ania struggled to remember the mother she'd once had, the woman who'd taken joy in the simple pleasures of raising her child and fixing their ship, the one who'd warned Ania over and over not to get involved in the big, messy affairs of the galaxy. What matters is the life in front of you, Marin Solo had said. It was advice Ania had always tried to live by.

Looking at her mother now, the whole thing seemed like a dream.

"You know," Ania whispered, "You're one of the last few people in the galaxy who can use the Force. Doesn't that count for something?"

"Let Skywalker and his Vong puzzle out its mysteries. I'm doing what I can, here and now."

Her mind went back to Jao, far-off Jao, and the things he'd told her about the mystical Force that guided his life. "What about the dark side? Isn't that what this is? Anger, hate, despair? You were a Jedi once."

"A very long time ago," Marin said. "If I hadn't been afraid of the dark side then, things might have been different. For you... and a lot of other people."

"Damn it, you don't have to live in the past."

Marin looked at her, finally, with very sad eyes. "You're so young, Ania. You need to get out of here. I mean it this time.

Take your friends with you. Maybe go find Skywalker and help him, it doesn't matter. Just go."

Her mother had been telling her that since they'd reunited, without words at first, and these last two times explicitly. Ania had been telling herself that too, but deep down she balked. If she left now then everything since meeting her mother again was a waste: every action she'd taken, choice she'd made, desire she'd had. Even caring at all about this twisted, tortured old woman was a mistake.

Ania refused to accept that. Without a word she stepped away from Marin and stalked out of the room, sparing only a short glance at the prisoner. Sora was watching her, and as soon as their eyes met Ania looked away. She hurried through the refinery, all the way out to the landing platform. Oren Vevac was manning the tripod cannon there and she asked him, "Any sign of Auchs?"

"Not yet, but Hondo say he's on the way." Oren looked meaningfully at the sky. The sun was a silver disc at the top of its arc, shining down through Bepin's milky upper-layer clouds.

Ania grunted, vaulted the barricade, and hurried toward *Free Agent*, which remained on the landing pad's far side. Sauk and AG-37 were waiting beneath its nose, watching her, expectant. When she got close enough she said, "Sauk, warm up the engines. I'm going to ask around. If anybody else wants to get off before Auchs shows up, I'll send them to you. Got it?"

The Mon Cal nodded eagerly. He'd been brave coming to Bepin with her, but the sight of detonate pinned to all those tibanna tanks was too much for him. "That means you're coming too, right?"

Ania took a deep breath. "No. I'm staying. But *you're* leaving. No matter what happens, Sauk, you're gonna fly off, settle down with some nice Mon Cal refugee and father a school of kids. That's an order." She turned to AG-37. "I'm ordering you too. I don't expect you to be obey, but you should get off this platform, A-gee. Get as far away from me as you can."

The assassin droid's twin photoreceptors pulsed. "I made a promise to a Solo once. There are two Solos here."

“My mother doesn’t think of herself as a Solo anymore.”

“Nonetheless, I made a promise.”

Ania knew it would be like that, but she didn’t want to be responsible for ending a life a century and a half old. She chided herself; no one was responsible for AG-37 except AG-37 himself, just like Ania’s and Marin’s choices belonged to them alone.

She turned and saw Sauk watching them, emotion welling in his bulbous eyes. Before he could say anything Ania pulled him close, squeezed him hard, then released.

“No time to get mopey,” she told Sauk, and herself. “Get those engines hot and get going.”

The situation center inside the Bakuran defense headquarters was a shallow bowl of ringed tiers with a massive holo-projection lighting the center of the room. It showed, in horrifying detail, the spread of ovoid Ssi-ruuvi and blocky Nagai warships to surround the planet and their continuous assault on the shield umbrellas raised to defend Bakura’s key cities. Shado, trailing Storr, Recado, and Koregion, had arrived just in time to see the last of Bakura’s orbital defensive cruisers burst after sustained attacks by swarming Ssi-ruuvi battle droids.

“They’ve never come at us like this before,” Recado muttered as he looked at the holo.

“Their allies have made them confident,” Koregion said.

“They don’t seem to have brought Mandalorians with them,” Storr observed. “That’s something.”

The general shook his head. “They have all the allies they need here on the ground.”

Shado asked, “Has there been any word from the factories since the Ssi-ruuk showed in orbit?”

“None we can tell. The P’w’eck are sitting tight and waiting for their masters to come back.”

“We don’t *know* that. If they were plotting to help the Ssi-ruuk, why not take over the shield generator stations?”

“Because the shield generators are defended by the military. The factories weren’t. Besides, those are what the Ssi-ruuk are after. I’m sure of it. The P’w’eck secured their primary targets in advance so they can attack us with impunity.”

Koregion spun on Recado. "Mister President, we have to deny them use of our industrial resources. It's our duty to hurt the enemy and we have to do it *now*."

Recado exhaled and bowed his head. Shado said, "What do you mean, deny? Destroy?"

"Doing that will cripple Bakura's economy for a generation," Storr said warily.

Koregion pressed, "The Ssi-ruuk are going to take this world. We can't defend against that kind of firepower. We have to hurt them the only way we can. Destroy the factories and destroy the P'w'eck."

"Which P'w'eck?" Shado snapped. "The ones in the factories, or *all* of them?"

The general's face twisted. "Your obsession with mercy put us in this mess, Jedi. If we had control over those factories we might be able to negotiate with the Ssi-ruuk, or at least stall their attack. We should have struck first and hard and tipped the balance in our favor."

"The Federation would never condone a government that slaughters its own citizens."

"The Master Jedi is right," Recado said, picking up his head. "And it would only stalled the invaders, not stopped them. As you said, general, they have too much firepower."

Koregion wasn't chastened. "That doesn't mean we shouldn't take the option now."

The president looked to Storr. "What kind of reinforcements was Coruscant sending?"

"Just a frigate, and not enough to be helpful. General Jaeger's fleet has been battling them in the Javin sector, and they could reinforce us." The ambassador couldn't sound confident. They all knew the Imperial fleet was in the process of a retreat from their tripartite enemy's advance.

"Bakura is on its own, as it always has been," Koregion said. "Mister President, I will do whatever you order, but *please*, let me destroy the factories. Don't give them more than they're already going to take."

"You'll ruin all Bakura's industry," Shado warned, "And you'll lose the P'w'eck forever."

"I have a feeling they've been lost for a while," Recado said, "Despite your best efforts."

Storr tried to sound reasonable. "The Nagai have shown a consistent pattern of mercy to planets the surrender quickly. That doesn't seem to have changed since they've joined with the Ssi-ruuk. There doesn't seem to be the threat of entechment either."

"We'll still be slaves to the Fluties," sneered Koregion. "We have to strike now, while we have the freedom to do so."

"The Federation won't let this world rest in enemy hands," Storr insisted.

"And *if* they liberate us," the general insisted, "The Ssi-ruuk will be smart enough to deny them resources when they pull out."

"Those are *Bakura's* resources," Recado said heavily. "And those are Bakuran citizens inside them."

"Not anymore. They've chosen treason."

Shado wanted to argue, but he wasn't sure the general was wrong. When he'd worked out the pact with Vlothaw he'd been sure the Force was moving through him; now the conviction seemed bitter vanity. He only knew that the prospect of more slaughter filled him with revulsion.

"So it comes down to mutual ruin... or balance." The president took a deep breath.

Shado leaned close and whispered, "It's about destroying the future, or having hope in it."

Recado's eyes met his. They were old, tired eyes but there was still strength in them. The president said, "General Koregion, broadcast a signal to the invaders. Tell them I'm ready to discuss terms of surrender."

Yaga Auch's shuttle plunged through Bespin's upper cloud-streaks, ripping holes in vapor shining silver and white in a midday sun. Standing in the cockpit and peering over his pilot's shoulder, the *Mand'alor* watched the tibanna refinery swell in size as they descended. He counted three ships on the landing platform, leaving room for Auch's own shuttle and nothing else. His enemies would have the place thoroughly fortified and he was a fool to walk in there, but he couldn't leave his daughter in their hands.

Standing beside him in the cockpit, watching the refinery grow close, Thorum Rhal said "Let me go in first, *Mand'alor*. I'll negotiate for you."

Yaga glanced at the man beside him, fully suited in maroon and gold armor. Rhal was a good soldier, but rhetorical finesse was not his strength. "It's my *ad'ika* in there, not yours," he said. "Besides, Hondo Karr's grudge is with me, not you."

"All the more reason for me to go down."

Yaga snorted. "You just want a shot at the *chakaar* who killed Chernan Ordo, don't you?"

"Bet your *shebs* I do," Rhal muttered.

Yaga was glad he had a helmet to cover his face. In the years since he'd killed Ordo he'd asked himself if he felt guilty for betraying his *Mand'alor*. The answer he'd been forced to come to was that he didn't, not really. He regretted choices he'd made, getting in bed with Sith most of all, but he didn't feel any pang of conscience when he thought of Botajef. He only felt guilt about a precious few things and knew how dangerous it was.

He'd seen how it had hounded his father and ultimately gotten him killed by that red-armored, Force-wielding Mando who still haunted his nightmares. Maybe Yaga had walled himself off from that feeling from that day on.

It didn't matter, and he chided himself for not focusing on Sora. He had no plan for tackling Hondo Karr and whatever help he'd used to secure the tibanna refinery. He had to assume the barve had planted charges and was ready to blow the thing out of the sky. Were Sora not there as hostage he'd gladly send Rhal down to negotiate and get incinerated, but his daughter's life was his responsibility alone.

His shuttle lowered itself onto the platform between unfamiliar ships. Yaga marked the main entrance to the refinery, barricaded by storage crates and protected by tripod-mounted cannons. A few windows from higher levels looked down on the pad, and he had to assume those were manned by snipers.

After the shuttle set down he clapped Rhal on the shoulders. "Stay here. I'll patch you into the audio from my *buy'c*. Hold position unless I give instruction otherwise. Understood?"

“Very. Good luck, *Mand’alor*.”

Yaga tilted his helmet in a nod, then walked down to the landing ramp. He’d armed himself with a *beskar* knife and two blasters, one holstered and one hidden in the underside of his right-hand wrist-armor. He expected to be deprived of the first one, but the latter usually got past inspections.

Four of his warriors went down with him, though he gestured for them to stay at the base of the ramp. He stepped out from under the shuttle’s shadow and saw a sole black-armored figure waiting for him on the platform-side of the barricade. At least four other Mandos waited behind it, including the one manning the cannon, and all had barrels aimed at him. Auchs wasn’t afraid; he knew he might die here, but not yet. They’d want to talk first.

It wasn’t until he stepped closer that he recognized the figure in black and gold as Hondo Karr. Back when he’d last seen the man on Botajef he’d had a green kit, but the new paint job was no surprise. Black was, after all, the Mando color for justice.

Karr had pistols holstered at either hip, but his hands were empty. He didn’t draw as Yaga stepped closer. The *Mand’alor* said, “I’d heard you were alive. Even heard you’d convinced your wife you didn’t kill Ordo.”

“We both know you killed him,” Karr growled.

Yaga didn’t mind that the conversation was being fed back to Rhial. It was nothing he hadn’t heard before. “Saying it over and over again doesn’t make it so, Karr. I’m impressed you managed to get enough people as you have to believe your *osik*.”

“I’d say the same to you.”

“Well, now that we’re even, I want to see my daughter.”

“We’ve got her inside.”

“Then bring her out.”

Karr planted hands on his hips. “Can’t do that. The boss wants her to stay put.”

“You’ve got a boss now, Karr?” That genuinely surprised him. According to rumors, Karr and his wife had been running their little band, but those rumors had never suggested they had the firepower they clearly did. “Bring your boss outside, then, so I can talk to him.”

“*Her*,” Karr corrected. “You come in or you don’t see your daughter at all. Take your time and think. I’ve got all day.”

They were fools to think him helpless just because he was outnumbered, but he’d still be at a huge disadvantage inside. He switched the comm to his private frequency and told Rhal, “I’ll go in and talk to their boss, whoever that is. I’ve got the tracking beacon on my suit activated, so you should be able to get my location within the building. If I give the signal, be ready to kick off the pad and bring the ship around to deploy at another location on the refinery.”

“That’s risky, *Mand’alor*. Those tanks are wired to blow.”

“They have my daughter,” Yaga said.

It was really all that mattered, and Rhal was Mando enough to understand that. “Understood, *Mand’alor*,” he said, then killed the link.

Yaga switched his helmet speakers back on and told Karr, “Fine. Let’s talk to your boss.”

Karr nodded and gestured for his people to make an opening in the barricade. They pulled two crates aside just enough for the men to slip sideways through the gap. He was surprised none of them made a move for his blasters, visible or otherwise. They still had him thoroughly outnumbered as Hondo led him through the refinery’s narrow industrial hallways. Three more Mandos were at his back with guns drawn; the one in gold might have been Karr’s wife but he wasn’t sure.

They finally reached a large room where a thick pillar ran four storeys up to the ceiling with circular platforms ringing each level. At least a dozen Mandos stood armed at the room’s edges, and two more lay on the lowest platform with rifles aimed at Yaga as he walked inside. His eyes caught two out-of-place figures, all the more incongruous together: an ancient-looking assassin droid and a young woman in a simple white jacket, black hair pulled into a ponytail.

Then he let his eyes go to the center of the room, where his daughter knelt alone. Her hands were bound behind her back and her helmet was off; he was surprised not to see bruises marring her face. Her expression was controlled as their eyes met, but he could see the neediness of a frightened child, the child she would always be to him.

And then one more figure stepped into view from behind the pillar. It froze Yaga's breath and erased all thought. The figure walking up behind Sora was dressed in full red *beskar'gam*, the same red armor he'd seen in nightmares for the past forty years.

In that instant Yaga was reduced to a terrified child again. He didn't think; he acted as he should have acted all those years ago as he'd cowered in mindless fear before his father's murderer.

He didn't grab the blaster at his hip. He raised his right arm, triggered the release of the small hold-out beneath his wrist, and twisted his palm so it fell into his grasp. Before anyone else could react, he whipped the pistol to level and fired.

And the woman in red reached out and caught the blasts on her palm. They fizzled to nothing against her glove, evaporated.

Like a Jedi could do. Or a Sith.

There *were* no Jedi, not anymore. Not like that.

It was like he was trapped in his nightmare of forty years ago, like he'd never left at all.

A second after his shot went off, Yaga got a barrage in reply. The two commandos on the platform pumped laserfire into his chest. It sparked against *beskar*, punched breath from his lungs, and knocked him off his feet. His bottom cracked hard on the floor and as he gasped for air his vision cleared and he watched the red-armored woman holding a hand high, signaling her men to cease their fire.

"Hold," Auchs rasped to Rhal, "Hold, dammit. I'm okay."

He pushed himself off the ground. No one shot him back off his feet. Steadying himself, Yaga looked at the red-armored woman, the one who'd killed his father and stood behind his daughter now, ready to take everything from him once again.

"Who are you?" he asked her. "What do you want?"

The woman stared at him in silence. She had no weapon in hand. She didn't need one, if she still could use the Force. Yaga had no idea how that could be. Not even Darth Nihl could touch it. What she could do was impossible, but a monster like her would be capable of anything.

He was surprised, though, when she reached up and took off her helmet. He sucked in breath as the visor moved up off her head, showing him what he'd never dare imagine. The face revealed was the worn one of a woman at least a decade older than him. Gray hair was pulled back and braided and her dark eyes were tired.

She said, "Take off your helmet." Her voice was surprisingly soft.

Yaga didn't do it. "What *are* you?"

"Maybe we should trade confessions," she said thoughtfully. "I'll tell you what I've done, if you tell me about how you killed Chernan Ordo for the Sith. And how you're working for them now."

If she had the Force she'd feel the lie and truth in his every word. So would all her commandos watching him, some surely recording too. He glanced purposely at Hondo, a black statue on his right flank. He said, "You've been listening too much to Karr's fairy stories."

"No," the old woman said. "I know what you did, Yaga Auchs. I know you made a pact with Darth Maladi. And I know the Sith came to Mandalore and helped you silence your enemies."

"If you brought me here to tell me lies, I'll just take my daughter and go."

"There was a Nagai among them," she said, and shiver ran down Yaga's spine. He had no idea how she could have known that. "Is it the same Nagai you're working for now? Is it the one who's commanding these campaigns? Has he been your master all this time, *Mand'alor*?"

His voice cracked, but he got out, "I'm my own karking master."

"Liar," the woman said. Not harshly; almost sympathetic. "You've always been a slave to your family's legacy. To your fear."

To me, she said, though her lips didn't move. Maybe he'd imagined it.

Yaga felt himself cracking beneath the old woman's gaze. Somehow she'd been less terrifying when she was a faceless red nightmare. He didn't dare look at Sora or show her the terror in his eyes. He growled, "Give me my daughter."

“You still haven’t confessed.”

He wanted to shoot her, stab her, erase her from existence, but he was trapped here and had been the moment they’d taken Sora. The monster was right. Ties of family bound him now as ever.

“What are you? A Skirata?” He asked for his benefit, and for Rhal’s.

The old woman nodded.

“I know you, You killed my *buir*. And my *ba’vodu* Gevern. Your *Mand’alor*.” That would get Rhal’s attention.

“I was no Mandalorian then,” she said, then added, “You killed people I cared about, too. Dorn. Ninet.”

“Fine then, blood for karking blood. It’s not really about this Sith *osik* at all, is it?”

“The Sith had you kill Chernan Ordo,” she said patiently, “Just like you’re working for them now.”

“*Osik*,” he repeated. “You barge into my work, steal my daughter, all for some karking delusion, you Skirata *dar’mada jeti* trash.”

Insults felt good, but she was unmoved. “Confess,” she said.

He dared look down at his daughter. Bravery and need mixed in her eyes. He remembered that day forty years ago when the Skiratas had come for him and his father seeking blood for blood. He imagined his own eyes had looked just like that.

On and on it went, generation after generation left restless by past crimes and seeking bloody recompense. He’d been running from the nightmare for decades, seeking domination over anything and anyone to escape the red monster in his memories, but the monster had finally caught up with him and it was just an old woman, tired and sad but bitterly resigned to bringing her long hunt to completion.

As he looked at Sora’s face Yaga remembered the face of another young woman in this room, incongruous against all the masked Mandalorians. And then he knew what to do.

Behind his own mask, Yaga took a deep breath. Then he raised his right arm, slowly and deliberately, so his hold-out pistol was pointed at the old woman again. An empty threat, but a good distraction.

“Give me my daughter, Skirata.”

“Confess,” she repeated.

“Give her to me,” Yaga said, and as he did so quick-drew his other pistol with his left hand and aimed it across the room at the mask-less woman standing beside the tall droid.

“Hold!” the old woman called before anyone could fire.

“Damn right you should hold,” Yaga rasped. The young woman was far away but he was a good shot and stood solid odds of dropping her. They all knew that. To the old woman he said, “This is your daughter, right? Right? Let mine go or I kill yours, right *shabla now!*”

No one spoke, no one moved. Even Yaga held his breath for fear of losing his aim. He struggled to keep one eye on either woman.

The old one sighed, shook her head, and said, “Do it.”

Marin registered shock from everyone: Sora, Ania, Auchs himself. The *Mand’alor* didn’t budge and didn’t shoot. Maybe he was wondering if Marin could block a shot at Ania through the Force. Truthfully, Marin didn’t know if she could, but she would try. She would have wrestled his pistol sideways already but wasn’t positive she could keep it from going off in his hand.

“Do it,” she repeated, “But if you shoot her, I’ll detonate the tibanna drums and blow us all out of the sky.”

His hands trembled but his pistol stayed on Ania. “You’re prepared burn your own karking daughter just to kill me?”

“Or we can let them both go,” Marin said. “And then I’ll let you go... But only if you *confess*.”

“I’ve got nothing to confess because I didn’t *do* it!” he snapped, but she could feel the desperation of his lie.

“You killed Chernan Ordo. And you’re serving the Sith now.”

“I swear if you don’t let Sora go-”

“You have your shot,” Marin reminded. “Take it.”

She felt Auchs’ confusion, his anger, his desperation. Even with the Force she had no idea what action he might take, and she braced herself for the flash of either blaster.

To her shock it was Ania who called out, “Stop it! Just karking *stop it!*”

She looked sideways. Ania was stepping closer, forming the third point of a triangle with her and Auchs. The *Mand'alor* shifted his left hand to keep his pistol aimed at her chest. Marin wanted to snap at Ania and tell her not to get too close; Auchs would never miss at this range.

But Ania, holding both hands in the air, said, "He killed your family, you killed his family, that was decades ago and you're *still* trying to do it! That's *enough*!"

"Ania—"

"You people have been going in circles for how long? Fifty years? More? You need to *end* it!"

"I'm trying to—"

"Mom, *wait*." Hands still held high, Ania turned to Auchs. "How long have you been in the Sith's pocket? A decade? More? Bet that must be *real* fun."

"Shut up, girl," Auchs growled, but he didn't shoot.

"I've got a friend. This Sith offered a pact with him once. Jao didn't take it because he knew they're all lying, cheating sleemos and if you agree to anything they'll use you for all you're worth. That sound about right?"

Auchs didn't speak, didn't budge.

Ania pressed, "I bet those Sith would've gotten nice proof you killed Ordo, right? Something to hold over your head and make sure you'd do anything for them, even crazy *osik* like this, am I right? Of course I'm right 'cause I know Sith. I karking shot one. In the *heart*. They die just like anybody else."

Ania was babbling, but impossibly, Marin felt something change beneath Auchs' mask. In a very low voice the *Mand'alor* asked, "What do you want, girl?"

"What do I want? I want you to stop trying to kill each other's kids! We can end this, *really* end it! Don't you get it?" She looked frantically between them. "You've both got the same problem and it's *not* each other! It's the *Sith* and if you work together you can get rid of them forever."

Marin didn't know if the surprise she felt was Auchs' or her own. The *Mand'alor* kept a blaster trained on each of them but she felt the wavering inside him. His desperation and anger had been replaced by doubt, and with doubt came freedom he'd never expected.

"Mom, please," Ania pleaded. "You can end this, really end it, the right way."

And Marin wondered if it *wasn't* the right way out of the cycle of vengeance that had ensnared three generations of Auchs and Skiratas. Maybe Ania could see a way out that Marin and Auchs, so old and wounded, could not.

To her Yaga Auchs had always been an object of hate and defeating him the goal to strive for. But memory returned to her from many years ago. Her own mother Tamar, whose feud with Gevern Auchs had started the cycle of vengeance, had once explained that she'd seen Gevern as the locus of her pain and fulcrum of her life. It was only after Gevern's death that Tamar had realized she'd made the *Mand'alor* a talisman onto which she transferred her own anger, regret, and self-loathing. In hating Gevern she'd really been hating herself, and liberation only came with letting go of it all.

Tamar Skirata had always tried to be a hard Mando warrior, but she'd been capable of Jedi wisdom all the same.

Realization felt like a heavy weight lifting from her shoulders. Through the Force, Marin could feel some weight leave Auchs as well.

She stepped back from Sora, and with a tug of the Force lifted the young woman to her feet. Sora looked around, uncertain as to how she'd risen. Then, with slow deliberate steps, she went to her father. Auchs lowered the hold-out blaster aimed at Marin, but kept his other aimed at Ania.

"Are you serious?" he asked Marin. "Will you really help me with the Sith?"

She felt him tilting, felt Ania's relief, felt the confusion and shock spreading through the others in the room. Hondo Karr was still right beside Auchs, blaster in hand. His hate for Auchs had been just as strong and just as personal as Marin's, and the prospect of a truce roused only anger.

Marin put her eyes on Hondo and added a touch of Force-suggestion as she said, "We will. Ania's right. This new war's about more than just us... But maybe we can stop it. Together."

Auchs' pistol wavered before he lowered it. Ania exhaled and dropped her hands. Hondo lowered his blaster, just a

little. Marin watched Yaga and Sora Auchs embrace and felt empathy she'd thought long gone.

When they separated Yaga turned to Marin. He holstered both blasters, reached up, and pulled off his helmet. It was her first time seeing his face in over a decade. Short hair fuzzed his scalp and jaw, as gray as hers. Jowls sagged off a strong chin. Bags gathered under his eyes. They'd both been fighting this battle for too long.

"Do you have a plan?" he asked.

"Not yet," Marin admitted. "But we've beaten Sith before. Together... I think we can do it again."

Interlude: A Long Time Ago...

War had come to Tython and its reality was more vicious than any Force-vision could convey. The skies around Anil Kesh were filled with death, and through the walls of the temple Tasha Ryo could hear muffled explosions as Je'daii and Rakata battled for superiority above the Chasm. Every so often something would impact against Anil Kesh's armored exterior, rocking the structure violently, and more than once she'd thought the one of the temple's three arching legs might lose purchase and the whole thing would fall into the black rift.

Muffled sounds and trembling beneath her feet were all Tasha knew. She could no longer see the corridors of Anil Kesh around her, nor could she feel the Force. The latter was a small mercy right now; she was sure it was filled with the agony and anger of clashing armies.

Small mercy was no recompense for what she'd been robbed of. Before the fighting had come to Tython, she'd received an intense Force-vision of a battle taking place around the Chasm's mouth. At that moment an agent of the Rakata had attacked her and, using methods unlike anything the Je'daii had ever known, the agent had left her physically undamaged but robbed her not only of sight, but of her ability to touch the Force. Tasha was doubly blinded, and it felt like all her fears of helplessness had been fulfilled, worse than she'd ever imagined possible. She was isolated within herself and angry. All during this invasion her desire to do more for the Je'daii had warred with her fear of dying and

revulsion from combat. She'd felt like a coward before; now she felt like a failure.

Nonetheless, there might be one thing she could do. Tasha clutched the last hope for salvation in her hands. Eight smooth sides of Master A'ng's holocron were familiar beneath her fingers as she was led to a meditation room so deep inside Anil Kesh it might even block out the sounds of battle. The floor still trembled and the arm around her shoulder drew her a little closer.

"We're almost there, Tasha," said the voice of Ters Sendon. Though no seer, the Zabrak Je'daii had been one of her instructors in the early days, before war and terror overtook Tython. He was trying to comfort her, but she could hear the fear in his voice.

He guided her for a minute more before he took her shoulders in both hands, angled her body, and said, "You can sit now."

She folded her legs beneath her. Clutching the holocron to her chest, she felt her knees sink into a soft cushion.

"We can try now." Sendon's voice sounded directly ahead of her. "I can't promise I'll be able to unlock the holocron. Only you and a few other Masters have done it before..."

"Please, try," she said. "It may be our only hope."

If it was hope, it was a bitter one. A'ng's holocron had already warned them that they were most likely doomed. Not even the Kwa empire had been able to resist the Rakata's predations. She cupped the holocron's bottom pyramid in two hands and held it out. She felt Sendon's larger, rougher fingers interlock with hers as he also gripped the device.

Tasha waited. She tried to steady her breathing as she did when meditating, but it was difficult now, without the Force flowing easily through her. Anil Kesh rattled once more around them. Through the chamber's deep silence she heard a few more explosions.

Then she felt something else. A tingling ran through her body; it felt like numbness being chased away.

Sendon said, "I am channeling the Force through the holocron to you, Tasha. Can you sense anything?"

"Yes, Ters. Yes, a glimmer! It expands..." Her breath went away as she felt a familiar touch; not Sendon's, but the

Force-energy that had been encoded into the holocron's circuits by its ancient Kwa architect.

A brittle voice said, "Peace. I am A'nang of the Kwa, the last of the Tython Kwa, master of this holocron. Ask, seeker, and I will guide you."

Sendon said, "Master A'nang, the Rakata have landed on Tython and are attacking! We seek your wisdom."

"The Rakata have arrived? Then the purpose of this holocron is at last fulfilled. It is time for Tho Yor to awaken."

Suddenly Tasha was bathed in the Force. It crackled up her arms and through her body, and in that instant she could feel both the mighty power locked within the holocron, the agony raging just outside Anil Kesh, the deep distortions looming in the Chasm below them, and something else, something she'd never felt before and couldn't compare to anything.

"Tasha!" Sendon shouted. He sounded afraid and far away, like he'd felt or seen something that had made him jump back.

But Tasha felt only calm. Her whole life she'd trained as a Je'daii seer, accepting the Force's revelations as they came. She felt that revelation now, and its absolute certainty. The unspeakable power was all around them, *had* been all around them all this time, but it had been slumbering. Now it was rising itself. She felt it like a surging tide, surrounding her, soon to swallow her whole. The thought of being consumed with power filled her with surprising joy.

"No, it's all right," she told Sendon. "I... I understand! Ters, I sense her now! Tython is awake!"

"Awake?" She could hear his gape. "What do you mean? We—"

"Tython is no ordinary world," said the holocron. "Otherwise, the Tho Yor would not have brought you here."

Mention of the black stone pyramids, one of which even now hung over Anil Kesh, stirred something within Tasha. She felt like she was on the verge of an even greater revelation, one that would overflow within her and burst out.

She struggled to find words. "Master A'nang, you said we were doomed if the Rakata came here. You told us all Je'daii would be destroyed."

"I also told you to stand firm together and be true to the Force." The Kwa's voice held gentle reprimand. "If you can do that in the face of despair, then the Je'daii will earn the right to survive."

Tasha whispered, "Tell us what to do."

"Your hope of survival lies within the infinity gate at the bottom of the Chasm. Even now the Rakata draw near. We must act quickly. Take me to the lowest levels of Anil Kesh, so we may look upon the Chasm."

Tasha held the holocron to her chest and told Sendon, "We must go immediately."

All hesitation seemed gone from him. He took her by the arm, raised her to standing, and said, "Hold tight. I'll guide the way."

Though her vision was still blinded, Tasha did not stumble once as Sendon hurried her through Anil Kesh's halls, down the lift that carried them to the observation port at the bottom of the temple's copula. It was here the Je'daii observers could peer straight down into the Chasm. A great beam of white energy plunged constantly into the gap, sampling what data could be gleaned for Je'daii scientists to pick apart in their quest to understand the anomaly.

Tasha knew when they reached the overlook. She could feel not only the rush of open air but the swarming Force energies reaching up from the black. They contained not only agony and war and maddening vision but something else too, something that could save Je'daii as well as break them.

Beside her, Sendon said, "Master A'ngang, we have brought your holocron here as asked. Now please, we need to know why."

The Kwa's voice came out from between her hands. "The appearance of the Rakata on Tython has triggered a failsafe mechanism within my holocron. It is time to awaken the Tho Yor. For that awakening, I need a Je'daii seer."

Tasha's heart leapt, then retreated. Just when she should have been able to help, she was at her most helpless. "Master A'ngang, I am no longer a seer... nor a Je'daii. The Rakata's agent blinded my eyes and blinded me to the Force."

"Blinded is not *severed*," said the holocron. "The Force flows through all living things and it flows through you still."

You can be reunited with the Force so you can awaken the Tho Yor, but it will cost you your mortal shell.”

Tasha felt a strange calm fall over her. The war against the Rakata had cost her vision and the Force, and she’d feared she would die a burden on her friends in their final moments. In dying she might even gain the transcendence she’d long sought. A’nant’s words, though spoken with utter gravity, sparked the hope she needed.

Sendon, however, said, “No! There must be some other way! Use me!”

Tasha shook her head. “No, Ters, you are not a seer. If there was any other way I know A’nant would tell us.” She took a deep breath. “This is our darkest hour. The Je’daii are fighting and dying to save Tython. All are doing was they’ve been called to do. How could I do any less?”

She heard him exhale as the simple truth of the situation became clear. Battle still raged outside. Down below, the Rakata neared the infinity gate. They had to act now. *She* had to act. It was what the Force had ordained for her; she knew that clearer than anything she’d ever received in a fractured Force visions. In the knowledge of destiny she felt free.

She felt Sendon’s hands press on either shoulder. His breath brushed her face. “I will miss you, Tasha Ryo.”

“In the Force, we Je’daii are never apart, Ters.” She removed one hand from the holocron to feel his face. It would be the last one she ever touched and she felt a moment of hesitation for the thought of her mother and father, her uncle Hawk and all the other Je’daii she’d known.

She hoped that, whatever became of her and of them, they’d understand what she did her today.

She hoped *she* would understand.

A’nant’s holocron whispered, “You know what to do. Do not fear.”

“I believe you.” She gathered courage and turned to the energy beam that plunged into the chasm. She could hear its hum and feel its heat. She knew from memory it was just a few meter’s jump away.

“Act now!” said the holocron.

“Yes,” Tasha whispered, took a deep breath, and leaped into her destiny.

Warmth enveloped her. Light chased away the dark of blindness. With destiny came understanding, the kind glimpsed through Force visions but always in tantalizing shards. Bathed with the light of Anil Kesh, falling toward the Chasm's infinity gate, Tasha knew it all and felt it all. It rushed her and overcame her and tore her body apart.

She knew it but didn't feel it. The luminous core of Tasha Ryo remained as Anil Kesh's energy spread her life-essence spread outward. It flew down the Chasm, piercing layers of madness as though it were nothing, and smashed into the infinity gate as Rakata crowded around their prize like scavenger birds. The Force's power was her own as Tasha cracked the ancient gate, shattered it, broke it beyond any hope of use by the Rakata.

Immense energy escaped the gate as it broke and the energy overwhelmed her. It funneled up into Anil Kesh and out of it. The ancient temple that had straddled the Chasm for millennia became a fountain of unleashed energy. Tasha rode with it, into the Tho Yor directly above and in arcs of light that vectored across Tython to the eight other black double-pyramids that had hovered silent for generations.

Tasha had no mouth but she cried out in joy, *Ters! Can you feel it? A'nang spoke the truth! I am one with the Force again, one with the Tho Yor...*

The energy carried Tasha Ryo to each Tho Yor and stirred it to life. All across the planet, the eight-spoked wheels carved into the stone pyramids began to glow. Though broken in nine pieces Tasha was one, and she felt it as raw energy burst out each Tho Yor and overwhelmed every Rakatan nearby, tearing each ship apart and wiping their darkness from existence.

The life force that was Tasha Ryo cleansed Tython of the invaders, but she barely noticed. The breaking of the infinity gate had unleashed even greater revelation, and it was all she could do to hold herself together before the truth pulled her apart.

Stars on stars, planets on planets. Infinity became her.

Vision came like it had never come before. Trapped in a mortal body she'd only ever been gifted with fragments, confusing and aggravating. By surrendering crude matter

she'd opened herself to revelation her mortal brain could never process. The self that remained threatened to unravel and fray but she felt a presence- conscious, comforting, necessary- join hers and guide her through infinity. It was like the firm guiding hand of a father, in touch with the Force as hers had never been. This was a father who held the Force in perfect balance, within himself and without.

You have achieved what few beings ever have, the Father told her. You have traded the worlds you know for greater knowing, the life you've had for great living, and the ones you love for greater loving. You have surrendered space and time to reach at a place more kind than home, more vast than space.

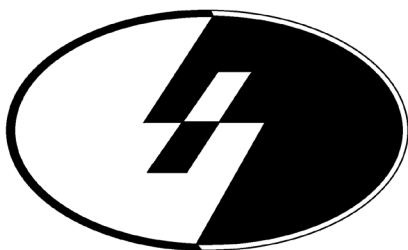
You have completed one journey. Now you begin walking a path without end.

She now knew who created the Tho Yor and why. She understood why only the Je'daii had been selected to touch the Force, why it had retreated from the Kwa and Gree and why it was leaving the Rakata even now. The self that was left of her felt a twinge of pity for the Rakata; evil as they were, they were now driven by desperation and fear as they slowly lost touch with the Force. Without it they'd be nothing, and they knew it, and their fate was to crumble slowly.

Tasha understood all those things, and she understood as no Je'daii ever could the Whills that guided it all. It was awesome and terrifying and her mind should have dissolved before it but she held herself as one. Though her mortal shell was dissolved her inner light was bright.

Like the Whills who'd gone before her, Tasha Ryo was immortal in the Force.

PART III



REVEALING FIRE

Chapter Twenty-One

The masters of Coruscant's weather had engineered a rainstorm the day before that had greyed the skies over Galactic City but washed away much of the dirt and pollution in its air. Clouds retreated overnight, and the following sunrise cast everything in a white-gold glow. From the empress' office, the skyline looked like rows of polished jewels spread out for miles in the newly-pure air.

Marasiah had been hoping to feel similar clarity inside her, but after Ganner Krieg and Azlyn Rae's return from Vorzyd V, the situation was more muddled than ever. They'd extracted verbal confession from a Black Sun lieutenant that they'd arranged the assassination attempt on Bavinyar and Ganner insisted he'd seen recorded video of the local vigo getting a visit from Darth Havok. The implications were staggering, but they'd failed to produce any hard evidence, even a copy of the video. Indeed, the only material proof they'd brought of their efforts were Ganner's injuries: cracked ribs, a broken leg, and a shattered foot.

It wasn't enough to satisfy anyone, lest of all her uncle Hogrum. He was back in her office, pacing tightly again. His black-cloaked form seemed to absorb all the room's morning light.

"Right now we should keep this information to ourselves," he said. "If we bring it to the attention of the senate they'll ask for more than hearsay, but we don't have that, and it will make our case look even more tenuous."

"We still have to act on it."

“Act how? It would be one thing if we knew where the Sith were, or why they attacked you.”

“We know why they attacked. They wanted to sow discord in the Federation and they’ve succeeded.”

Since the election of Tem Brighton to speaker of the senate, dozens of senators from Imperial-aligned sectors had staged walkouts in protest of ‘the election of a terrorist supporter.’ It wasn’t enough to keep the senate from having a voting quorum, but tempers were at a boiling point. Apparently there had also been an attempt on Porat Derrol’s life, in the supposedly-secure senatorial apartment complex no less, which kept the pro-Alliance senators feeling righteously victimized. More than ever she regretted creating the legislative body.

“If we had any evidence it might calm tempers,” said Hogrum, “But this would just feed more rumor. Frankly, I’m not sure there *is* evidence to be found.”

“What do you mean?”

“I understand Masters Krieg and Rae have a personal attachment in this case, but I don’t think they were the best to send to Vorzyd.”

“You think attachments clouds their judgment?”

“Partially. Sia, all we have is his word that Darth Havok-Eshkar Niin- visited Vigo Pleshchai. Azlyn Rae couldn’t identify him from the recording.”

“Master Rae never met Niin. Or Havok.”

“No, and because they weren’t allowed to copy this record- apparently- all we have is Master Krieg’s hearsay. He and your husband were close. It’s natural he’d want Antares’ death to be part of some grand Sith scheme.”

His words stuck to the bone; when Marasiah had heard the report about Havok her heart had irrationally swelled. If she could get justice for Antares *and* her mother, and bring down the Sith too, she might finally shake the feeling of failure that had been crushing her since Bavinyar.

Sobered, she asked him, “Why else do you think sending Ganner was a bad idea?”

“Frankly, Sia... I’d recommend against sending Imperial Knights on missions this critical. Leave it to my intelligence operatives.”

She rankled at the thought of relegating her Knights to ceremonial jobs. "All Imperial Knights were trained to work in the field."

"They were trained to use the Force. Their instinct is to call on it, even when they can't." He sighed. "I like this even less than you do. Losing the Force has... hampered me. It's hurt all your Knights. With stakes this high you need operatives that you can trust to operate at their best capacity. None of your Knights can do that."

"And what should I do with them instead?"

"I don't know. I'm just telling you facts."

It would be a humiliation to strip her Knights of their duties, but as her uncle had said, it might also be necessary. "I'll need to think about this. In the meantime—"

She was interrupted by a buzz from her desktop comm system. She tapped a button to open the line. "Speak."

"Majesty," said Astraal Vao, "Admiral Stazi is here to see you. He says it's urgent."

Marasiah glanced up at her uncle. His relationship with the admiral was deteriorating and would be ruined altogether if Stazi found out he'd been spied on. Stiffly Hogrum said, "Perhaps I should excuse myself."

"Send him in," Marasiah told Astraal, then told her uncle, "Wait here for a moment. We'll see what he has to say."

Stazi came through the doors a second later wearing his Alliance admiral's uniform, an announcement in itself. Before he spoke she sensed him through the Force and found no anger, only eager resolve.

"Empress," he said, and to Hogrum, "Director. I think you'll both want to hear this."

"Hear what?" she asked.

"I've just received critical intelligence from one of my operatives about the war in the Outer Rim."

"What sources specifically?" asked Hogrum, automatically skeptical of Alliance intel.

"I believe you're both familiar with Anj Dahl and Rogue Squadron. You may also know that a former Rogue is part of a Mandalorian faction seeking overthrow of Yaga Auch's."

"We know of them," Marasiah said. Dahl and her Mandalorian contacts had worked with Shado Vao and

Azlyn Rae last year in a fruitless attempt to find Darth Maladi.

“Commander Dahl’s contact, Hondo Karr, has just sent us some stunning news. First, the Nagai warleader Relik K’sharn is also Darth Nihl, reigning Lord of the Sith.”

Marasiah and Hogrum both stiffened in shock. The intel director said, “How did Karr learn this?”

“He didn’t specify. He only said that he’d obtained a source very closer to the Mandalore.”

It made perfect sense. Darth Nihl had escalated his Outer Rim campaigns the very same day he’d arranged the assassination on Bavinyar. The Federation had since been riven with confusion and anger, which in turn crippled its response to Nihl’s assaults.

“That’s still hearsay,” Hogrum said. “We’ll need more specific intel if we’re going to act.”

“He’d provided some.” Stazi held up two green fingers and tapped the first. “One, he suggests that the next push will be in the Atravis sector, up the Hydian way. He says it will be mostly a Ssi-ruuk affair, while the Mandalorians and the Nagai solidify control over the Javin sector.”

“We’ll ready a counteroffensive at once,” said Marasiah.

“With all due respect, I recommend we hold off acting on this intelligence.” Stazi tapped his second finger. “Karr also informed us that the Ssi-ruuvi battle droids are currently being powered by brains of Geonosian manufacture.”

Hogrum’s eye narrowed in thought. The handful of tiny pyramidal Ssi-ruuvi battle droids they’d recovered from combat zones were a visible departure from the ones they’d used a century before. New mechanisms had been installed to power and operate the machines, which had seemed to corroborate Hogrum’s report that the Ssi-ruuvi entechment scheme was no longer working. Because of the alien nature of Ssi-ruuvi technology and the battle-damaged state of recovered specimens, they’d been unable to decipher much from the modifications, though some had suggested that the new computer brains resembled those used by the Colicoids, Geonosians, and other insectoid droid-making races.

“You’re recommending a fast strike at Geonosis,” Hogrum said. Marasiah caught a hint of admiration.

"I am," Stazi nodded. "We don't know whether the Geonosians have exported any of their droid-making tech to Lwhekk or another Ssi-ruuvi world, but we can at least cut off the source."

"And the counteroffensive at Atravis?"

"Frankly, I don't want to risk exposing our new intel source this early. Countering them at Atravis might do that. If we attack Geonosis, Nihl's more likely to think we deciphered their technology or found an informant within the Geonosians themselves."

That left Atravis open to conquest, destruction, and death, but breaking the Ssi-ruuvi supply of battle droids would end this campaign sooner. It was a hard choice, but Stazi had never shied away from those. Marasiah looked between the admiral and her uncle and sensed they were in rare concord.

"Very well," Marasiah said, "Take Geonosis. It will be interesting to see how the Ssi-ruuk and Nagai react to that."

"Excellent," Stazi bobbed his head eagerly. "We can't afford to tip our hand before we attack. General Jaeger and Admiral Slossar should continue to hold their current positions. One of them might reposition near Atravis so they're able to respond quickly once the new offensive starts."

She finally understood Stazi's eagerness. "You plan to lead the offensive yourself, Admiral?"

"I'd very much like to. Empress, I'm a soldier at heart, not a politician. I can lead Admiral Bey's fleet. Any Imperials willing to work under my authority are welcome. We've been on the defensive this entire campaign, but we can shift everything in our favor with one strike."

Her eyes shifted to Hogrum. Her uncle nodded very slightly, which was good; Marasiah had no intention of stopping Stazi. "Ready your fleet," she said. "I'll ask Admirals Fenel and Yage if they're willing to spare some ships."

"Excellent. I'll draw an invasion plan right away."

He was already turning for the door. She called, "Admiral, one more thing."

He spun back to face her. "Yes, Empress?"

"You should know we've uncovered evidence the Sith were behind the assassination attempt on Bavinyar."

She felt Hogrum's discomfort, but Stazi's wide eyes grew wider. "Have you now?"

"The evidence is limited and nothing we can put to the public. But I want you to know the battle you're fighting. Expect subterfuge."

"I will," he nodded. "Thank you, Empress."

He spun again and marched out of the room. She could sense her uncle's frustration but he held his tongue. Maybe this, she thought, was the turning point they needed. With the Sith defeated she might salvage the Federation after all.

Darth Havok had never felt so reduced. He had no bacta for his scorched abdomen, no comm to call for help, and no blaster to defend himself in Coruscant's underworld. He had no cast for his broken shoulder and no medicine for the stabbing pain. His only tool left was, of all things, a damned set of macrobinoculars. If he'd had the Force he would have overcome all the rest, but he was deaf and blind, his helplessness complete.

He'd gotten as far away from his crash site as he could. He didn't know if they were still searching for him, but he had to assume they'd be thorough. Moving was agonizing and slow, and as soon as he'd found a door he'd gone inside, where he'd be harder to spot.

Coruscant's shining towers grew dark and neglected the further down you went. Warrens existed miles directly beneath clean office spaces and government buildings. Sometimes they held forgotten treasure; after retrieving a glowrod, Havok spent uncounted hours scouring the long-abandoned rooms of one building until he'd found a disused medical center and with it several containers of expired bacta. He'd slathered the liquid on his stomach wound regardless. The pain receded somewhat, and it became easier to move.

In counting all he lacked, Havok had overlooked the most crucial thing of all. Eventually he became painfully hungry, and nothing in these abandoned levels was edible. He crept outside and found it was night. He didn't even know what he was looking for, only that he'd have to scavenge or steal, as he had no credits to buy with.

He wandered for hours more, jumping at shadows until he spotted a flickering firelight further down the artificial canyon, perhaps a hundred meters beneath. Where he'd have once dropped down and used the Force to soften the landing, he now had to search for a stairwell or a ladder, and when he finally did he was forced to backtrack to the firelight. By the time he got near his entire insides felt yawning and empty. Weariness as much as pain made it hard to walk.

Havok counted three figures laying around the fire. In the darkness they were only lumped shapes, and when he drew near it became clear all three were sleeping. Homeless drifters, probably. There were worse kinds of scum lurking in Coruscant's underlevels, Havok knew, and he counted himself lucky. Moving as quietly as he could, he examined the things these indigents had gathered. Piles of dirty clothing assaulted his senses, but he spotted a few packages of nonperishable food in the firelight. After turning off his glowlamp he bent low to pick one up, but pain stabbed out of his side. He couldn't keep himself from crying in pain as he sunk to his knees.

The noise roused all three indigents. They kicked back their ratty blankets and reared up to stare at him, and the closest one, an Aqualish, barked and lunged forward. Havok skirted back in panic, dropping the glowlamp, but the Aqualish kept coming, waving its arms in anger.

"Hold up, hold up!" said a voice from behind Havok.

The Sith jerked and looked around to see a dirty human raising his hands. The Aqualish seemed cowed and no longer advanced; instead it sat on its haunches and glared in silence. Firelight played unnervingly across the curve of its large black eyes.

"Gorok don't like you touching his things," the man said. He smiled beneath his tangled beard but there was a touch of menace. Havok realized, sickeningly, that his life was in the hands of these pathetic beings.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

The third indigent, a Nimbanel with withered gray skin, said, "What want, you?"

"I just need food." He tried to adjust posture but pain shot out from his side again, and his face screwed in a wince.

“Hurt, you?” the Nimbanel asked stupidly.

“I’ll be all right,” Havok lied.

The Aqualish barked something. Havok guessed it might have been *get your own food*.

The human, though, looked sympathetic. “Maybe we can get you a little,” he said. “How long you been down here?”

“Long enough,” Havok grunted.

They all watched him carefully. They could tell he was hurt and probably that he’d only ended up in the underlevels recently. He wasn’t safe among them, but he needed food badly.

The human scooted over to another pile of filthy clothes. He pulled them back to reveal an equally ratty but intact tarp, then pulled back the tarp to reveal his food stash. He took out a small container and held it out. Military-grade rations. No taste but plenty of valuable nutrients.

“Thank you,” Havok said, and wondered why the man had given up something so valuable so easily. He looked at the Aqualish and Nimbanel, both edging closer and from different directions. He’d never be able to take all three at once and he felt a wash of panic.

“It’s mine,” the human said warningly, “But you can have a piece.”

The Aqualish barked and waved a hand. The Nimbanel said, “Ask nicely, you.”

Did they want him to beg before they killed him? Havok burned with anger and shame. Without the Force he had no way to use those emotions. Growling he said, “Please let me have some rations.”

“Good.” The human smiled through his beard again. “Gorok, help him out.”

Havok saw a shadow in firelight, and that gave him a second’s warning before the Aqualish came at him with a knife drawn. His combat training from both the Sith and Imperial Knights took over. Still seated, he pivoted and snapped an elbow into the Aqualish’s face. The creature dropped his knife and Havok grabbed it with his left hand. His right arm formed a hook and snared the Aqualish’s thick neck. The alien howled and kicked while the human and Nimbanel rushed to help subdue Havok.

The Sith lashed out with the knife. The blade cut across the human's face and he fell back, but when his hands pulled away Havok was surprised how little blood flowed from the wound. At the same time the Aqualish struggled, broke free, and pushed Havok into a pile of filthy rags. The creature lunged at him and even as pain filled his body he lashed out with the knife again. It skirted across the Aqualish's chest, tearing ratty clothes but not flesh. The human came to help pin Havok down, but the Sith lashed out with the knife again and this time plunged it straight and hard into the man's neck. Blood geysered; he howled and fell back, kicking violent death-throes. The Aqualish was stunned, and Havok reached out, grabbed the glowlamp he'd dropped earlier, and slammed its butt-end hard against the Aqualish's skull. There were one more howl as it fell back, but Havok threw himself on top and repeatedly smashed the glowlamp's hard metal end in the grey cranium until he'd cracked it open, spilling orange blood to mix with the human's.

Panting, panicked, Havok looked up. The Nimbanel was running away and soon disappeared in the night. Havok had neither the strength nor will to chase. He staggered back, off the Aqualish's body, and dropped bottom-first onto the ferrocrete. The human had stopped breathing and stopped moving. Havok felt a giddy rush fill him; the indigents had tried to take him by surprise and mob him three-on-one, but he'd beaten them. Even wounded, even without the Force, he was still a danger to be reckoned with. He still deserved to call himself Sith.

Before getting up to rummage for more food, he reached over and pulled the knife from the dead man's throat. He wiped blood on his trouser-leg and looked at the blade clearly for the first time. He realized why it had taken so more force to do damage with it; rather than the vibro-blade he'd assumed, it had dull edges and a rounded tip. A knife for cutting food, he realized. The Aqualish had been trying to help him.

Triumph evaporated. Still holding the knife, Havok looked around the dead bodies, the blood-washed ferrocrete, and the pile of filth in which he sat. Bile rose in his stomach and against himself he keeled over and vomited from an empty

stomach. As acid burned his throat he couldn't help but think that *this* was how his life would end. Once one of Roan Fel's most respected Knights, he'd murdered his beloved empress and become Sith in search of something greater. His search had led him here.

He tried to tell himself he couldn't give up, not even now. When he was ready he began to search again for food. He'd eat it far from here. He'd survive one day at a time if he had to. Havok was a Sith, by choice and deed. He had to find a way to save himself. He repeated it like a mantra. He had to find a way.

With the Force a healer could mend broken bones, even those as badly fractured as Ganner's, within hours. The time for those miracles had passed and instead he was forced to rely on standard medicine. Bacta was good at mending soft tissue but when it came to fixing a shattered foot or tibia, the only solution was bone splints, calcium injections, and a lot of rest.

Being stuck in a hospital bed was the last thing Ganner needed right now. He had nothing to do except replay the stupid and shameful decisions he'd made at Vorzyd. Worse, it recalled the long days of isolation after being kidnapped by Maladi, where despair had nearly swallowed him whole.

Azlyn was paying him daily visits, just as she had before, and like before she was the one bright spot of his day. On the third day she came in with a look of concentration on her face, and instead of first asking Ganner how he was doing- the same as the past two days- she got down to business.

"It sounds like the pieces are coming together," she said. "Apparently Admiral Stazi got intel from an Alliance source that Darth Nihl and the Sith are behind the attacks in the Outer Rim."

Ganner pushed himself upright in his bed. "How did they learn that?"

"I don't know. I don't think they have hard proof either, but it makes sense. Terminus and Bavinyar happening at the same time was always too much to be a coincidence."

So it was the Sith who were responsible for Antares' death. Ganner felt satisfaction inside, and with it frustration that he

was trapped in this bed, body broken because of his own rash misjudgments.

“Stazi’s going to the Outer Rim personally to take command of the counteroffensive,” Azlyn said. “There’s not much we can do about that right now, but I’ve been looking into some other things that might be relevant.”

“Like what?”

Azlyn crossed arms beneath her respiration chest-plate. “Kagar Aynes apparently had a connection to Senator Porat Derrol, one of Stazi’s ex-soldiers and a close ally of Tem Brighton.”

“I know. And?”

“I’ve been looking into Derrol. Apparently somebody tried to kill him around the same time we were off on Vorzyd.”

“Apparently?”

She shrugged. “It happened in the speeder garage at the senator’s apartment complex, but the incident report is really vague. No security cams got a good look at the assassin, despite the fact that he drove his speeder bike in and out the front gate.”

“You could do that with the right kind of sensor-jammer.”

“I know, but those aren’t easy to find. Derrol’s allies in the senate are saying that’s proof some high-level Imps were trying to kill him.” She shrugged again. “We’re basically going off eyewitness reports. Derrol says a shadowy figure came up to him after he’d parked his speeder. He saw the guy draw a weapon and pulled his own.”

“Senators go around armed nowadays?”

“After the accusations he’s gotten, I guess he became justifiably paranoid. And he *is* ex-military. Derrol says he got one shot in the attacker. The guy went back to his bike and fled. Derrol says he kept firing and winged the bike on the way out of the garage. Investigators picked up some outside holo-cam footage that show the bike falling fast into the chasms.”

“So the assassin’s dead?”

“Maybe. What piqued my interest was that a few other eyewitnesses confirmed Derrol’s attacker was an Iktotchi.”

Ganner tried to reign in his enthusiasm. “The galaxy’s full of Iktotchi. We don’t know it was Havok.”

"If it was, I'm really interested as to why he was paying Derrol a visit. It goes against all we learned on Vorzyd. Black Sun put Aynes on the job, not Derrol. Unless Derrol recommended him to Black Sun..."

That seemed too convoluted. Ganner shook his head. "If Derrol was working with Havok, why did Derrol try to kill him?"

"I have no idea. Like you just said, we don't even know it's Havok."

"You wouldn't have brought this up if you didn't think it was worth looking into."

"I know. I've talked to the empress. She's agreed to assign a team of security officers and intel agents to trawl the lower levels with me. Whoever went after Derrol, she wants him found. If he's dead, she wants his body."

Ganner hoped the assassin was Havok and Havok was alive. He hoped he could repay some of his grief onto a Sith, personally, and there was none he'd rather repay it on than the one who'd betrayed his oath as an Imperial Knight.

Azlyn must have seen that in his face. She reached down and took his hand. "Don't get too excited. All of this is a long shot."

"I know."

"And Ganner..." She hesitated. "I know you've been through a lot. More than any other Knight, maybe. Before all this started, you were always the calm one. The one who was at peace with himself and could help show the rest of us how to best serve the Force." She squeezed his hand lightly. "I always admired that about you."

They'd not talked about his violent outburst on Vorzyd. He was hoping they never would. "It's been... difficult," he admitted. "When I had the Force, I could *feel* it guide me. I could feel peace. Now... I don't have that. All I have is me."

And he hated what he'd become: a plague vector that spread disease worse than death, a man who flailed in the water while his best friend was gunned down before him, a Knight who forgot his own limitations and ended up broken in a hospital because of it.

Azlyn squeezed his hand again. It wasn't much, but it kept choking despair away. "We can still get through this. Stay

here. Heal your body and your mind. Let me do what I can about Havok.”

“Of course,” he said. “I trust you.”

He realized he trusted her more than anyone right now. She’d adapted better than most to losing the Force. When she’d had it, she’d been torn between Jedi and Imperial Knight, rival careers and rival purposes. After losing both options she seemed to have gained a practical focus on the problem directly ahead of her. He envied her that.

Azlyn withdrew her hand from his. “Sit tight. Heal up. I’m going to need your help when you’re back in shape.”

“I look forward to it,” Ganner said.

Chapter Twenty-Two

From their perch on the hilltop a kilometer away, carefully hidden beneath a white blanket that matched the snow, Eli and Talon watched as Cade Skywalker entered the portal on the monolith's slope, disappeared for less than two minutes, then came falling out. His inert form tumbled down the black stone slope before being grabbed by the astromech droid and lowered as gently as possible to the ground, where Skywalker's friends gathered around.

From his position, Eli could see nothing except their huddled backs, but when they remained like that for over a minute he said, "Something is seriously wrong with Skywalker."

"Agreed," Talon said, and continued to peer through her macrobinoculars.

Eli looked at her, expecting more. Up until now he'd been wary of approaching that group; aside from being outnumbered, there was little they could do against Skywalker's Force abilities. Now the situation had changed; Skywalker was down and his allies were distracted. There was no better time than now to take them by surprise. Eli knew it and so did Talon, but his master's jaw clenched tight as she tried to decide what to do.

In a low voice he said, "We can take the bike and come in fast. Stun as many as we can on the first pass."

"Are you confident in your aim, apprentice?"

Without the Force he could never be fully confident of anything, but this was an opportunity they couldn't afford to waste. "I can do it," he said.

“Very well.” Talon finally lowered her binoculars. “Disabling the Wookiee is the top priority. Then the Imperial Knight.”

“I understand.”

“Good.” She unfurled the blanket, exposing them to the cold, and pushed to her feet. Eli hurried with her to the speeder bike and hoped what he’d promised was true.

There seemed nothing they could do except huddle around Cade’s limp body. Deliah still held him in her arms, his head in her lap, but the touch of her pink fingers to his face did nothing to stir him. His eyelids twitched and his hands trembled slightly; his breath was shallow but fast. It was like he was trapped in a dream he could not escape. For all any of them knew, he might be trapped there forever.

Through his shock Jariah was angry. For all he knew Cade’s brain had been permanently fried by whatever had happened inside the monolith. There was no doubt the thing had opened to him because he alone could touch the Force. Then it had overloaded his mind with mystic power or knowledge or whatever the Force gave you. Through all this long quixotic quest Jariah had tried to tell himself that the dangers were less than what they’d faced before, because Cade was the last damed Jedi in the galaxy and he could handle anything. But of course that was a lie; there were things not even Cade could handle. The worst part was, Jariah had seen this coming all along, or something like it, but he’d shoved down his worries because Cade had seemed in control.

He hated the Force, more than anything, because it always made him helpless.

Deliah was whispering to Cade, telling him to wake up. Lowbacca roared loudly and C-3PO said, “I quite agree. We must get him to the medical bay on *Mynock* immediately.”

“Is he okay to move?” asked Kyra.

“Nothing’s wrong with him physically,” Deliah said. “It’s just whatever that thing did to his head...” Her voice broke. “He’s *gone*. I can’t sense any of him.”

The Zeltron’s empathic skills worked even when the Force didn’t. Jariah scowled and said, “Okay, let’s pick him up and

get him inside.” He doubted *Mynock*’s medical systems could do help with whatever damage the Force had wrought, but at least they’d get him out of the cold, away from the damned pyramid.

Lowbacca had enough strength to carry him easily, and the Wookiee moaned for Deliah to move aside. She stroked Cade’s face one more time, then reluctantly moved away.

As Lowbacca bent to pick him up, Jariah noticed a sound, low and humming beneath the wind’s faint whistle. It was the sound of repulsors, approaching fast, but it was so out-of-place and unexpected it took a second to register.

That was a second too much. Jariah lifted his head just in time to see a single speeder bike, dual-seated and mounted by twin black-clothed figures, leap over the pyramid’s edge and veer down at them. As he reached for his blaster the bike pivoted to circle around them, exposing its flank but also giving the back-seat passenger a chance to aim his rifle.

Two shots popped out before Jariah drew his pistol; both took Lowbacca in the side as he was bent low to grab Cade, and the Wookiee got out merely a low moan as blue stun energy flashed across his body. His massive, furred form dropped to the ground and just barely avoided crushing Cade.

By then Jariah had his pistol drawn, and so did Deliah, but the speeder bike was fast and the pilot jerked and juke to avoid their tracking fire. The back-seater released another spray of stun bolts. Jariah barely managed to dodge them but Deliah was a second too slow, and she crumpled as well.

Jariah dropped to one knee and released his own shot. This one flew steady and true, winging the speeder bike’s rear section and causing it to lurch. The pilot dropped altitude and Jariah got a good look at her. The long lekku and pretty face done up in scarlet and black was as unwelcome as it was unmistakable. That probably meant the gunner in the back was the human apprentice they’d tangled with last year.

“Fall back!” Jariah called as he scooted toward Lowbacca, Deliah, and Cade, all piled unconscious together. Jao and Kyra dropped down beside them, both hefting blasters, but Talon didn’t bother to circle around for another pass. Instead she drove her speeder right at them, forcing them to fire or flee before getting fatally rammed.

Jariah tried to do both at once; he managed to land two scorching shots on the bike's metal nose but missed Talon herself, and he was barely able to dodge out of the bike's path. Jao and Kyra and merely managed to dive away in time.

However, Talon cut acceleration at the last second and brought her bike to a shuddering halt atop the three prone bodies. As she hovered over them she drew a blaster and levelled it at Jariah. The boy in the back dismounted nimbly, rifle aimed at Jao and Kyra.

For a second everything was still. Cold wind blew across the snow-swept plain.

Then Talon said, "Put down your weapon, Jariah Syn. You can't win here."

His first instinct was bravado. "It's still two versus three, *schutta*."

She was unimpressed. "What happened to Skywalker?"

"You think we know? He went into that monolith, came out a second later like that." Jariah's eyes darted beneath the bike, then back to Talon. "Bet you were watching the whole time, weren't you?"

"Correct." She dismounted the bike, attention still on him. "Is he alive?"

Jariah considered lying but said, "He's all twitchy and stuff. Don't know if there's anything left in his head. Do you know what this thing is?"

There was a tiny pause, as if she were waiting for her partner to speak. Then she admitted, "We do not."

"Good. Then we're all in the same boat," Jao said. "We might be able to work together on this."

The Imp was an idiot if he thought rapprochement would work with Sith. Talon thought so too. "We do not 'work with' our enemies."

"Are we enemies? You're not a Sith anymore, not really, just like I'm no Imperial Knight." Jao edged a step closer; Kyra stayed behind him, feet planted.

"I will *always* be Sith," Talon snapped. It sounded like Jao had struck a nerve.

"Right now we're nothing," Jao insisted, and took another step. "There's no reason to fight."

"Hold it," the young man said. Eli, Jariah remembered. "Stay where you are and drop the weapon."

Jariah watched, surprised and appalled, as the Imperial carefully placed his rifle on the ground. Kyra, thankfully, kept her raised and levelled, though Jariah doubted she'd be much good in a firefight.

Jao asked Talon, "Do you still have the lightsaber you stole from me at Te Hasa?"

Talon blinked, then said, "I do."

"Well, you can keep it," Jao said as he raised both hands in the air. "It doesn't do me much good anymore."

Talon frowned but kept eyes and blaster on Jariah. If Jao was trying to distract the Sith or force their guard down it didn't seem to be working. The Twi'lek said, "Tell both of your droids to come here."

"Don't need to tell them anything," said Jariah. "They can do as they please."

To his disappointment more than surprise, C-3PO shuffled awkwardly up to the Sith and their captives, R2-D2 rolling behind him. "Oh dear," the protocol droid said, "This is a most unfortunate stand-off. And it seems to me quite an unnecessary one."

"You understand nothing, droid."

"With all modesty, Mistress Talon, I think it's quite the contrary. I am, after all, a protocol droid, and my years of experience in diplomatic relations outnumber your years alive several times over. It is clear this situation preludes an outcome that will benefit neither party."

"I did not *ask* your opinion," she growled. Whether C-3PO was trying to rattle her or not, he was getting the job done.

R2-D2 rolled past Threepio's gold legs and edged closer to the prone bodies. The droid gave a mournful whistle. Talon looked at him with annoyance.

"He's Cade's droid." Jariah he realized what was about to happen and readied himself. "He wants to see if he's okay."

"It's just a machine," Talon scowled, eyes darting back and forth between Jariah and the astromech rolling up to her.

"That thing's more than that," Jariah insisted. "Trust me, if you think-"

He didn't say more and didn't need too. When he was a quarter-meter from Talon, four of R2-D2's side hatches popped open. The droid unleashed a pained-sounding whine and, with it, expelled a blaster of crackling electricity that jumped across its metal shell to the nearest conducting body. Talon tried to jump back, but without the Force her reflexes were a millisecond too slow.

She howled in pain as R2-D2's shock jumped up her leg and jolted her body. Her hand spasmed around the blaster but when she squeezed the trigger the shot went high, and Jariah was already on one knee. He nimbly switched his blaster from *kill* to *stun* and released a single shot that took the Twi'lek in the chest and dropped her.

There was no time to feel triumphant. Jao had charged Eli without a weapon; the younger man might have blasted him in the gut but shock delayed his reaction. The older man barreled into Eli, backing him into the side of the speeder bike. Eli let out a cry of pain but wasn't done yet; he pushed back and slipped sideways, bounding away from the bike. Jao pivoted to track him, only to turn into the red-white blaze of Eli's ignited lightsaber. The blade sliced into his waist from the right, beneath the ribcage, scorching through clothes, skin, and entrails.

Jao got out only a grunt; Kyra screamed and rushed Eli. The young Sith pulled his blade out of Jao and the wounded Imperial stumbled backward and fell. His body wilted across the back of the speeder, eyes staring blankly skyward. If he was alive he wouldn't last long.

While Jariah hurried around the bike to get a clear shot at Eli's back, the Sith had turned to face Kyra. The girl unleashed a flurry of laser blasts and the Sith tried to parry the red kill shots, but without the Force his reflexes were slow. He deflected blasts aimed at his core, but one skimmed his left shoulder, scorching it.

Kyra, desperate and angry, wasn't thinking straight; instead of staying back and dropping Eli with either a stun or kill shot, she rushed toward him and Jao both. The Sith recovered from his pain, deflected two more shots aimed at his heart, then cut the barrel off Kyra's blaster.

Eli lunged close and- smart lad- instead of spearing her through with his saber as he easily could have, he maneuvered himself behind Kyra and locked one arm around her neck in a chokehold. He faced Jariah using Kyra as a body-shield and held his lightsaber horizontally in front of her, so he could either deflect shots or kill her with a small motion.

Kyra gasped for air and instinctively clawed at Eli's arm. The boy glared at Jariah, who kept his blaster high and aimed. He might be able to get off a stun blast that took Eli down but left Kyra unharmed; the slightly safer option would be to stun Kyra first, then try to land a second shot on the Sith.

Either way, Eli could easily kill the girl before Jariah got to her.

The kid was in hardly better position. Talon was down. Kyra was squirming even as he choked her; the girl wasn't much shorter than he was and she was trying to work one leg around his ankle to unbalance him. Eli avoided her boots as he backstepped them toward the speeder bike, over which Jao's prone form was still draped.

Jariah decided to try and rattle him. "You really botched this, you know? You could have taken us all by surprise but no. Now we've got your *schutta* master. You've got a feisty prisoner. You really think you can run anywhere with her?"

Kyra kicked at Eli's legs but he didn't budge. The boy glanced over his shoulder at Jao and said, "I hurt your friend. The longer we stand off for the less likely he'll survive."

Jariah shrugged. "He's no friend of mine. Think I care about some Imp?"

He had no intention of letting Jao die, but it was close enough to his real feelings that Jariah could sell it. He saw doubt in Eli's face, pain and shock in Kyra's. He'd apologize later.

"I'm only in this for Cade. You and all your Jedi-Sith *poodoo* don't matter to me. Far as I'm concerned the whole galaxy'd be better off if your kind stayed extinct." He tilted his blaster slightly for emphasis. "Do whatever you want, *bukee*. Don't matter to me either way."

Hurt deepened on Kyra's face, but Eli got thoughtful. He edged himself against the side of the speeder bike, then

tightened his hold on Kyra, arcing his back to lift her fully off her feet. The girl kicked futilely; Jariah popped off his first shot. It took Kyra in the chest and stunned her instantly but Eli didn't let go. Jariah took a second shot at the boy's face but he was already falling backward, carrying Kyra with him and he sprawled onto the bike's front seat. Instead of dropping Kyra and wrestling for the bike's controls he jammed the heel of his boot into the right pedal and fired and accelerator.

The speeder bike went flying blindly, three bodies sprawled atop it. Jariah swore and fired off two shots, both wide; he steadied his grip and took aim again at the fast-receding tail end, but better judgement took hold and he held his fire. Eli was wrestling the thing under control; he watched it jerk back and forth, then peel in a smooth rightward curve. Stun him now- with Jao and Kyra already down- and the bike would probably fly off and crash, killing all three.

Jariah swore again and lowered his blaster. He looked at the bodies sprawled around him in the snow: Cade's, Deliah's, Lowbacca's, Talon's. R2-D2 moaned sympathy and C-3PO said, "I'm sorry, Master Jariah, but you did the best you could. Frankly, I thought it quite impressive."

"Not good enough, Threepio." He scowled and holstered his blaster. "Not good enough."

By the time Eli piloted his speeder back to the crevasse in which they'd dropped their shuttle, his heart had almost stopped racing and he'd almost gathered his thoughts. Syn was right; he'd bungled so badly he'd lost his master. He brought two bodies back with him, sprawled atop one another on the speeder's rear seat. The young woman was still out with the stun blasts, and the Imperial Knight seemed to have gone into shock after the lightsaber-wound in his gut.

As he dismounted the bike Eli looked at them both and wondered what to do. He could take one hostage and leave the other here in the crevasse, thus forcing Skywalker's allies to waste time looking for them. Yet he didn't see what that would get him; they still had Talon, and he'd need to do something about that sooner rather than later.

He guided the speeder bike into the shuttle's hold, bodies and all. When he looked at her more closely he saw the woman was no older than him; perhaps she'd been a Jedi padawan. He'd need to restrain her. The Imperial Knight would need medical attention if he was to survive, and Eli wasn't even sure if he should bother.

Then he realized he had greater concerns. As long as he was on this planet, Skywalker's allies might still find him. They had more people and *Mynock* was a tougher ship, and they'd have no problem pinning him in his crevasse. Even with two hostages they could force him to surrender, which meant he needed to get away from Tython. He hurriedly found restraining cuffs, rolled the girl onto her stomach, and latched her hands behind her back. Then he raced to the cockpit and began starting the ship.

The familiar lights and sounds of the cockpit further anchored his mind. Eli had options to consider now. He could run from Tython, leave the system entirely, then hail Darth Nihl and explain the situation. If he were to admit losing Darth Talon it would shame them both permanently, and he had a feeling Nihl's trust in them had already been severely eroded. Nihl might even order him to return to the Outer Rim and leave Talon in enemy hands, and he found he did not want to do that. Talon had never been a warm and nurturing master, but she was still his master, and it wouldn't feel right abandoning her.

More importantly, if he fled the Deep Core now he'd have nothing to show in the search for Khat Lah. He only knew that, somehow, the Yuuzhan Vong had made an important discovery at that pyramid. Perhaps Skywalker had made the same one himself, and his addled mind yet held the secret to recovering the Force for them all.

Eli's business here was clearly not finished, but he couldn't wait for *Mynock* to hunt him down either. Once repulsors were powered on, he raised the shuttle carefully out of the crevasse and into the sky. Then he fired engines and pushed them out of the atmosphere.

He checked scanners nervously. *Mynock* didn't show on them, nor any other ship. When he cleared atmosphere he was forced to make the choice: run back to the Outer Rim

and beg mercy from Lord Nihl, or stay here, wait for Skywalker's allies to show themselves, and try to force a favorable solution from this impasse.

If Talon had been here he'd have more confidence, but she wasn't and that was exactly the problem. Stern cold teacher though she'd been, she'd still been his guide. Now Eli felt truly alone in a way he hadn't since his so-called protectors had sold him out to Sith hunters five years ago. His fate was entirely in his own hands.

He could fly off to an unknown system and leave everything, Jedi and Sith, behind forever. The idea came to him unbidden; it thrilled and frightened at once. The precipice enticed but also repelled. He could never imagine a life without one order or the other. They were literally all he'd known.

He took a deep breath and checked his scanners again. Still no *Mynock*, but that ship would have to rise sooner or later. Eli looked dead ahead and saw both of Tython's moons, hovering on either corner of his viewport. Ashla and Bogan: one light, one dark. Viewed from his angle they seemed like mirror images, and he could not say which seemed the original.

Eli set a course and nudged the shuttle forward. He would bide his time in lunar orbit and wait for *Mynock* to show itself. Without hesitation he set course for Bogan, the dark moon. He told himself it was declaration of purpose, and a promise for the future.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Bakura's conquerers seemed determined to prove themselves gracious in victory. There were no massacres and no orbital bombardments. Supposedly the critical factories had been filled with P'w'eck and Ssi-ruuk engineers determined to bring them back to full productivity, but from the window of his hotel room- which had become his comfortable prison- Shado Vao saw only the columns of scarlet-skinned Ssi-ruuk marching in triumph down the streets of Salis D'aar. To the Bakurans, who'd lived in fear and anticipation of the alien invaders for a century and a half, this must have been the realization of all their nightmares, and the relative gentleness of the Ssi-ruuvi occupation would do little to comfort.

Locked in isolation, Shado knew nothing about Storr, Recado, or anyone else. He only got glimpses of the outside world when he tried to access the HoloNet, and from there he only caught repeated messages proclaiming the benevolence of the Bakura's new rulers and the danger in risking their ire.

With plenty of time and nothing to fill it, he became trapped in an endless cycle of regret. He started to wonder if Koregion had been right, that the P'w'eck had used his good intentions to stall for time and set Bakura up to fall with its vital resources intact. He'd thought, for a brief moment, that he could still sense the truth of things even without the Force, but he saw now that had been a projection of his hopes and nothing more. He could only pray his wishful thinking hadn't led to disaster.

After two and a half days, Shado finally received a visitor besides the P'w'eck who dropped off his meals. He threw up

his hands at the sight of three massive, red-scaled Ssi-ruuvi warriors standing in his door, their strange paddle-beam weapons aimed at his chest. The lead one released a set of frantic, angry-sounding whistles, but when they'd arrested Shado they'd taken his translator, so all he could do was stand there confused.

He got the point when the Ssi-ruuk backed from the door, allowing him space to exit into the hall. As soon as he did so the leader began jabbing the butt of its weapon in Shado's back, edging him forward. They led him all the way outside, where a speeder piloted by one very unhappy-looking human waited. Shado and his captors stepped were whisked back to the defense headquarters, though he had no idea what purpose the building served now.

The halls, he found, were mostly empty, with small packs of Ssi-ruuk or P'w'eck mixed with the occasional monochrome, humanoid Nagai. He realized he was being herded back to the situation room from which he'd watched Bakura fall to the invaders.

When Shado stepped into the bowl-shaped chamber he saw the holographic representation of Bakura had been replaced with a map showing this quadrant of the Outer Rim. Red lights marked the galaxy's edges and pushed Coreward along the Corellian Trade Spine and Hydian Way. Clearly, someone was admiring their conquests. Most of the planets taken were backwaters that received little attention from the rest of the galaxy, but it was still an astonishing amount of territory to take in just a few months.

As the Ssi-ruuk pushed Shado toward the base of the hologram he saw a single figure standing there, looking up at the captured stars. From the silhouette it was a Nagai, tall and thin with broad shoulders half-hidden in long black hair. Shado hadn't met many of the race, but there was something familiar in this one's shape.

Then the Nagai turned. Shado recognized the shape of the face and the jagged black tattoos that covered the lower jaw. The eyes were different from what he remembered yet the same, having shifted from molten gold to deep red without losing their predatory ferocity.

Darth Nihl smiled, white teeth against black jaw. "So it is you. When I heard there was a Twi'lek Jedi on Bakura, I dared wonder."

Suddenly it all made sense. The nascent Nagai conquests had come first, followed by the Mandalorians, who'd long been in the pocket of the Sith. The killings on Bavinyar and the rupturing in the Federation must have been the work of Sith agents too.

"You must be proud of yourself," Shado said.

Nihl stepped closer, and Shado marked familiar the long-bodied lightsaber laying against his hip. The Sith said, "I understand you were proud of *yourself*, Jedi. They say you were the one who convinced Bakura's president not to send in troops and retake those precious factories from the P'w'eck."

"Who told you that?"

"The P'w'eck themselves, of course. They were the ones who requested our assistance. If you hadn't stalled things, we wouldn't have gotten here in time to get what we wanted."

It was everything he'd dreaded hearing. Shado clung to the fact that Sith were liars. "I don't believe you."

"You should. I brought you here to thank you, Jedi. Vlothaw says you gave him everything he could ever want."

That was another blow. "If you brought me here to gloat, I'd rather go back to my room."

"I'm not gloating. I'm complimenting you on still being a Jedi, even after all you've lost."

"All *we*'ve lost."

Nihl looked back at the holo-map. "I haven't lost anything. When the Force went silent I was terrified. I admit that. But then I saw *opportunity*. I was already planning a new conquest, but when the Ssi-ruuk lost their ability to entech- a side effect, I understand, of Maladi's curse- I found the opening I needed. The Ssi-ruuk and the Nagai saved each other. I needed allies. They needed a way to power their war machines, and a vanguard army that could help them prepare worlds for consecration."

"Consecration?"

"The Ssi-ruuk are the spiritual race," Nihl said with faint admiration. "They believe their souls will wander the cosmos

unmoored unless they die on a planet consecrated by their priests. They've been holding ceremonies on all the worlds we've taken. The size of their hold empire has tripled in a month."

"I'm sorry I missed Bakura's consecration," Shado lied.

"Ah, that was over a century ago. They call this world Xhwee. The Ssi-ruuk have had their eyes on it for a long time. They're ecstatic to have finally conquered it."

"And you're happy to add its manufacturing base to your war machine."

"I understand I should thank you twice for that."

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't just delay the Bakurans until we could invade. When the planet's president had to decide whether to destroy the factories- and the thousands of P'w'eck inside- you convinced him to be merciful. To choose hope over destruction."

There were so few ways Nihl could know that. "Who have you talked to? Recado? Koregon? Storr?"

"The Ssi-ruuk have *talked* to all of them." He gave the word an unpleasant stress. "They never bothered with you, Shado Vao. They thought you were inconsequential. Pity them, underestimating a Jedi."

"You brought me here to mock me."

"And does that anger you?" Nihl stepped close enough for Shado to grab him. He fought the angry urge, less because it was a dark trait and more for the Ssi-ruuvi paddle-beamer at his back.

Nihl saw his urge and restraint, and smirked. "I really did bring you here to thank you, Jedi, and not just for giving us Bakura intact. You're the first of your kind I've seen since the Force went silent. The rest of them seem to be cowering on Coruscant, praying for their powers to come back while the galaxy burns anew. I wasn't surprised to find the Jedi were weak-willed children without the Force... but I was disappointed. So thank you, Shado Vao, for restoring a little of my respect for the Jedi."

"We're still Jedi. All of us."

"Maybe you are. We're still Sith, and look what we've managed to accomplish even without the Force." He waved

at the holo-map. "Which of our orders, do you think, is the stronger?"

Shado kept his lips pressed tight. He couldn't even deny Nihl's boast.

"It's no surprise," the Nagai continued. "The Jedi preach obedience to the Force's nebulous will. They claim to surrender their own agency to some greater power, but they used it for their own ends and their own power, always."

"That's not true. The Jedi have always worked for a greater good."

"And what good were you working for on Bakura?"

"I was trying to save everyone- the humans, the P'w'eck, the-"

"Liar!" Nihl snapped. He stepped so close hot breath brushed Shado's face. "You marched into that factory full of P'w'eck because you were sick of feeling *useless*. You were willing to sacrifice your life just to tell yourself you were working a noble cause. You created a drama in which you could play the role of a savior, but you miscast yourself, and why? Because you were a fool who didn't understand his own intentions."

"That's not true," Shado insisted.

"The Sith have always been stronger because we don't delude ourselves. We're not heroes, or saviors. We fight for what we desire and we give no quarter until we've wrestled that desire from the universe. We've lost the Force, but there are always other tools." He grinned viciously again. "And there are always people willing to *be* tools."

Shado wanted to call him a liar, but he no longer knew what was true. Recado had said: *Idealism can be the most insidious form of vanity*. Maybe he'd let his lofty aims misguide him. Without the Force he had no anchor, no compass, no way to tell wrong from right.

With a chill, he wondered whether he'd even known at all. Perhaps even the will of the Force had been self-righteous delusion, nothing more.

"I've given you something to think on. That's my gift of gratitude, Jedi, for all you've given me." Nihl stepped back and told the guards, "Take him back to his room and leave him there."

The Ssi-ruuk whistled and began nudged Shado in the back. As he was turned away Nihl added, "I'll call on you again before I leave Bakura. Perhaps I'll even take you with me on my next campaign. The insights of a Jedi would be quite fascinating."

Shado refused to look back, but as his captors led him out of the defense headquarters the Sith's bloodred eyes and sharp-tooth smile remained in his mind's eye, mocking him. He knew they'd stay with him for a long time.

Marin stood on the tibanna refinery's landing platform, looking up at the bottom of Yaga Auch's shuttle as it blasted into Bepin's sky and disappeared into sunset streaks of red and gold. It was a sight she'd never expected to see. She hadn't expected to be alive right now, or to feel light with unexpected hope.

A lifetime's earned cynicism asserted itself. There was no guarantee Auch would keep his word, though she'd felt his grudging honesty in the Force as they'd spent hours hacking out a plan. He could always change his mind and break his oath. The Sith might outsmart them all, or the Federation could fail to come through, though she'd been assured their message would get Admiral Stazi's ear.

Things could go bad on Marin's end, too. She got ample reminder of that when she looked toward the refinery entrance and saw Hondo Karr standing alone before the dismantled barricades. The slanting sun brought out the gold highlight on his black *beskar*, and Marin could feel the frustration simmering beneath his red visor.

Hondo had never been one to hide his feelings, so when Marin got close he wrenched off the helmet to show a square face tight with anger. "This isn't what we agreed on," he said.

"It's not what I had planned either, but this can work out best for all of us."

"You mean for *shabla* Auch's."

"I mean the whole galaxy. These conquests are tearing up the Outer Rim but we can stop them."

"If Auch doesn't stab us in the back, like he stabbed Ordo."

"I didn't sense deceit in him."

“Well excuse me for not trusting your *shabla jeti* Force powers. Wish you’d told us about those in advance, by the way. Listen, that man framed me for murder and ruined my life. He killed his *Mand’alor*. He can’t get away with that. I won’t let him.”

It was strange to hear the lust for vengeance in Hondo’s voice. She’d felt something very similar just a day ago. Now that desire had evaporated, and she could barely remember what it had felt like.

“This doesn’t mean there won’t be an accounting, but right now we have to put our own interests aside. There are Sith behind this. With Auchs’ help we can bring them down and maybe even stop this war.”

“Maybe. This war has been lucrative for Mandos so far. Some might not want to give it up.”

They’d be more likely to if their *Mand’alor* told them to go back home. Auchs had signaled himself ready to do that; Marin had felt that he’d never even wanted to join this fight in the first place. To end this war and keep the peace they might well have to protect Auchs, and that prospect still twisted her stomach.

She’d once told her mother Tamar that in times of crisis, you ended up doing the right thing even when you didn’t want to. There were higher stakes here than justice for Auchs and Marin couldn’t turn away from them. Maybe that meant part of her was still a Jedi after all.

Hondo still needed placating, and she told him, “We’ll deal with Auchs. I promise. But first we need his help taking care of the Sith.”

“I’m going to hold you to that. We all will.”

“Don’t threaten me, Hondo. For your own good.” She used a touch of the Force to put a little fear in him.

Hondo nodded seriously and turned away. Marin exhaled once he disappeared inside the refinery. He wasn’t the only one unhappy with the turn their crusade had taken. She’d felt surprise and dissatisfaction among all her people, and she had no doubt that Auchs was going to run into some on his side.

To take down the Sith successfully they’d both need to keep their own people in line, which meant she and Auchs faced

the same dilemma right now. She didn't like that kind of irony.

There was one person who was clearly satisfied with the turn of events. As they started to withdraw from the refinery, *Free Agent* swooped down to pick up Ania and AG-37. Marin would depart in *Starlight Champion*, and while this wasn't a final goodbye with her daughter, it was nonetheless hard to put her feelings to words.

Ania, though, spoke with an easy relieved smile. "We'll see you up there," she said at the bottom of the landing ramp as AG-37 clanked into the ship. "Let us know the coordinates when you get them."

"I will," Marin said. She tried to say something more but couldn't.

"You know, sometimes things work out best when they *don't* go the way you planned. Sometimes you've just got to take things as they come and make whatever decision seems best at the time."

Marin had thought like that when she'd been Ania's age. Experience had taught her it was bitter folly but now, decades later, she wondered if perhaps there'd been wisdom in youth after all.

"It's not a perfect plan," her daughter admitted. "But it beats being trapped in the past. At least, I think so."

Maybe she was right. Marin prayed she was.

"Well, I'll see you spaceside," Ania said, but hesitated before going up the ramp. She inched a half-step toward Marin. Her mother edged closer. Finally they pulled close for a short embrace. Then Ania pulled away and hurried up the ramp.

Marin stepped to the platform's edge and watched *Free Agent* kick off, rise, and disappear into the Bepin twilight. When its lights were gone she went to her ship to prepare for whatever came next.

The Yaga Auchs who lifted off that tibanna refinery felt like a different man than the one who'd boarded it. All the old worries that had hounded him- his daughter, the Sith's blackmail vise, the red monster from his nightmares- had disappeared. They'd been replaced by a new set of

problems, just as immediate and potentially more dangerous, but their novelty alone made him feel less assailed.

As their shuttle pushed out of Bepin's gravity well toward his waiting frigate, Thorum Rhal presented the first of those problems in his typical straightforward fashion.

"When your comm cut off I thought you were fragged," he said. "Guess it's a good thing I didn't charge in there guns-blazing."

"I had the situation under control," Yaga said, because it was the sort of thing a *Mand'alor* was expected to say.

He and Rhal both knew it wasn't true. He'd had either weapon trained on Marin Skirata and her daughter when the girl's shouting about Sith pacts got too close to accurate and he shut down his helmet's audio link with a subverbal command. What Rhal had heard would be enough to excite his imagine, and Yaga had hastily prepared a lie for his lieutenant.

"Here we all thought the Sith were gone," Rhal said. "Or at least useless without the Force. Guess I was wrong."

"They're cunning *hutuune* even without their powers," Yaga grunted. "But maybe we can get the edge on them for once."

"That why we're letting those karking Skiratas go after all they done? We can still drop a few torps and blow that refinery out of the sky."

"No. We need them."

"To beat the Sith."

"That's right."

Rhal crossed armored arms. "You're gonna have to explain that, *Mand'alor*."

He put a hint of sarcasm in that title. Good. Best to get it all in the open.

Yaga said, "You want an honest answer? Fine. After Botajef, I was in trouble. Lots of barves thought I had no credentials to take Ordo's place."

"I wasn't one of them."

"I know. You were behind me from the start and I'll never forget that. But I had to fend off others who wanted the helm. The Sith offered help. I should've turned them down but I didn't."

“Why would the Sith help you?”

“They wanted Mandos out of the war. I wanted that too. I thought it was win-win. But that Skirata girl was right. Every deal with the Sith works in their favor.” Rhial said nothing, but Yaga knew he was skeptical. “You understand why I wanted to keep this secret. It’s humiliating, having to rely on *dar’jeti chakaare*. But we’re going to end that. We’ll be free soon. Every last Mando.”

“So we beat these Sith somehow... Then what? We fall back to Mandalore, sit tight again?”

“We’ve made our mark and fought well. We’ll keep getting jobs, only this time, we’ll be able to pick and choose.”

It was a nice-sounding argument that worked better on people who hadn’t listened to half his frantic conversation in the refinery. Rhial was suspicious and he’s stay suspicious, but if he kept taking orders Yaga was confident his other lieutenants would fall in line.

“So,” Rhial said, “We got a specific plan yet?”

“Wait and see what our boss’ next order is. That’s Darth Nihil, by the way. Dark Lord of the Sith.”

“How impressive. I thought he was Relik K’sharn.”

“He is. Or was. These Force-users can’t keep their names straight.”

“Poor them. Don’t suppose it makes ‘em easier to kill.”

Yaga remembered what his daughter had told him more than once. “They’ll die from a blaster-shot same as anyone else.”

“Guess we’ll find out soon.”

Yaga hoped so. He hoped he’d be the one to pull the trigger, but first he had to engineer a situation where the Sith could be safely exterminated. They were spread throughout the Nagai fleet but not, he understood, on any Ssi-ruuk ships, nor on Mando ones. That gave him a place to start. The most important thing was to be rid of Nihil, and he’d never feel sure the Sith was dead unless he did the deed himself.

But first things first, he told himself. He’d passed key intel on to Skirata and Karr, and they’d promised to pass it on to the Federation. If Coruscant did what it was supposed to, Nihil’s reaction would dictate his own.

Betraying a Sith was neither safe nor easy. It was a tricky problem but it was a new problem, and that alone was enough to give Yaga hope he'd never expected.

From orbit Geonosis was a flame-colored marble, and the explosions bursting in the space around it reflected the red-orange hue of its rocky surface. Each flare died out within seconds but the planet continued to turn ponderously beneath, as though in purposeful contrast to its fast-dying echoes. There was a savage beauty to combat; Stazi had always known that, but he'd forgotten how exciting it could be.

It felt good to be on the bridge of a starship again, and even better to be on *Alliance*. He and Jaius Yorub had stolen the mighty *Imperious*-class destroyer from the shipyard at Mon Calamari, and from its deck Stazi had commanded the climax of the war against Krayt. Its crew, many of whose faces were still familiar, operated with perfect discipline and efficiency despite nearly three years of peacetime. They'd deployed fighter squadrons, raised shields, and began firing offensive barrages all before Geonosis' defenses could begin countering the battle groups deployed around it.

From the moment *Alliance* did its first sensor-sweep, it had been obvious that Geonosis was not expecting an attack. That had roused Stazi's suspicions that the Mandalorian intelligence wasn't as good as promised, but those were quickly allayed when the space stations in orbit began belching out swarms of Ssi-ruuvi battle droids, all powered by Geonosian mechanical brains.

The insectoid droid-makers were a secretive species that had stayed out of galactic affairs for over a century, and Stazi doubted they had the stomach for a prolonged, devastating fight on their homeworld. Nonetheless, they were putting up a fierce defense. No one had discovered a good way to counter those droid attacks yet, but Stazi was hoping the Geonosians, once subdued, might provide some help in exchange for leniency. He had to get to that stage first, which meant putting down the droids.

After a few hours of using Alliance-only ships, he'd called in his backup. Two groups with three Imperial star destroyers each joined the fray, forcing the Geonosians to spread their

droid swarms thinner to counter attacks from multiple points. The Imperials seems to be relying on their destroyers' heavy shielding to absorb most of the droid attacks, while Stazi's people were using starfighters and quick gunships as counter. Neither strategy seemed more successful than the other, and the admiral growled in anger when another gunship was overwhelmed and exploded.

"It's going to come down to attrition," Jhoram Bey said as he watched the tactical display with Stazi. The Weequay seemed relieved to have passed command back to his old superior officer. "We have the firepower to outlast them, but it's going to be a very messy battle. I just hope we have time to finish it."

Stazi grunted agreement. They'd brought an interdicator and raised an expanded gravity well around Geonosis, but if HMS-equipped Ssi-ruuvi cruisers arrived as backup it wouldn't matter. At best it would delay the Nagai.

"The Geonosis government still refusing our offer to parlay," said Ona Antilles. "That could mean they're expecting backup."

Alliance's captain was a young human, her perpetually stern expression enhanced by the scar across one cheek. She was an able and devoted officer, but her seriousness made Stazi miss Jaius Yorub, who'd known there was more to life than war and duty.

"Be patient," Stazi told them. "Our intelligence suggests they've bulked their forces in the Javin sector. That's well away from here."

"Intelligence," said Antilles, "has been unreliable so far."

She had him there, but their questionable Mandalorian contact had provided information Hogram Chalk and his spies hadn't, which Stazi took as cause for optimism. They watched the explosions continue to burst around Geonosis, and Antilles visibly winced as an *Alliance* frigate was destroyed.

A lieutenant at the tactical station turned to the officers and reported, "Captain Bovark says he's punched a hole in their defenses. Requesting permission to deploy ground forces."

Perhaps the Imperials had the better strategy after all. Stazi looked at the tactical holos and saw three star destroyers

pushing into the planet's lower orbit. If Bovark deployed landing teams they might get trapped on Geonosis if the space battle turned. If Geonosis had poor ground defenses they might tip this battle in their favor.

Stazi had built his career on such gambles. "Tell him to deploy," he said.

The lieutenant nodded and relayed the order. Under her breath Antilles said, "Good of the Imps to ask permission."

"It is an encouraging sign," Stazi said. "But I'm more concerned about getting our people through."

Bey scanned the holo and pointed to one cluster of Alliance ships. "These might be able to do it. The droid screen nearby is weak."

"They'll react fast if they see we're deploying."

"We've got our best fighter units with that team. They'll cover the landing ships."

"You mean Rogue Squadron?"

The former pilot allowed a rare smile. "I do."

"Then we'll have to trust to Captain Dahl and company. Give the order."

They watched tensely as the Alliance ships drew close enough to the planet to launch landing teams. The Ssi-ruuvi fighters, naturally, rushed to intercept. Rogue Squadron and the other Crossfires hurried to stop them. The droid fighters lost some maneuverability in atmosphere but, unencumbered by living pilots, they were still capable of performing aerial acrobatics that would rob most flesh-and-blood species of consciousness.

As the Crossfires desperately held back the droid fighters, Stazi checked on the Imperial insertion. They seemed to be having a smoother time of it, and had already passed into the lower atmosphere. He noted that neither landing group was taking fire from the surface, which meant, hopefully, that Geonosis was unprepared to defend itself on the ground level. That was only mildly encouraging; the planet's surface was mostly barren desert, and the natives lived in underground hives that formed a natural defensive shield.

The battle continued to rage even after the Alliance landing party entered the atmosphere and began deploying near the mouths of Geonosis' hive settlements. Bovark's destroyers

pulled out and helped a group of Alliance ships struggling against more droid fighters. Together they wore down the enemy, then launched their combined firepower against the nearest defense station. The orbital platform was no longer pumping out droids but it had heavy cannons that managed to punch through one destroyer's ventral shields, crippling it badly, while a Mon Calamari cruiser suffered severe damage on its right flank. Nonetheless, the cooperative attack worked, and soon the station began a fiery plunge into Geonosis' atmosphere, where it broke apart into burning pieces.

"Excellent." Stazi pounded fist into palm. "Relay my congratulations to Captain Bovark. And send the Geonosians another offer to surrender."

With the defense station down, a hole had been opened for more landing craft to deploy. As shuttles and drop ships raced unopposed toward the surface, the comm station reporting a hail from planet.

"Maybe now they're willing to talk." Stazi strode quickly across the deck and loomed over the comm lieutenant's shoulder. "Open the line."

A holo appeared in front of him, revealing a long-snouted Geonosian face. The creature began talking in its own language, a mix of grunts and clicks, and Stazi had to wait for the automatic translator to relay the words in text beneath the holo. The Geonosian said, "I am Grand Duke Serac Kor, speaking with full authority of the Council of Hives. We are ready to offer our surrender, on the condition that no member of the Council will be punished."

In other words, they were hoping to escape and responsibility for their actions. Stazi was frankly disgusted by the offer, but these Geonosians were not his main enemy. Removing them from the war, regardless of conditions, would cripple the Ssi-ruuk and leave the Nagai weakened.

"I'm willing to accept, if you comply with *my* condition," Stazi said. "The Council of Hives must cooperate fully with Federation investigators and hand over all material and expertise relating to the weapons you've given the Ssi-ruuk and Nagai. Even the smallest failure to cooperate will be considered a breach of the agreement and the Council will lose all immunity from punishment. Do you agree?"

The Geonosian clicked and growled, and the text said, "We will comply with your terms."

"I'm very glad. I'll tell my troops to stop firing. Shut down all your droids in orbit and offer no resistance to our landing parties."

"Yes. We will honor our agreement immediately."

The holo shut off and Stazi told to comm officer, "Broadcast to all ships. Tell them to cease fire."

He walked over to the viewport. Geonosis' red marble turned slowly beneath but the explosions grew sparse before disappearing entirely. Soon the only things visible around the planet were the glow of starship engines.

Not a bad showing after three years, Stazi thought with muted pride.

He went back to the tactical station, where Captain Antilles reported, "Our ground teams are meeting no resistance. They'll be at the central hive shortly."

"Excellent. Begin tallying casualties and start a cleanup operation. Aside from recovering crew, put a priority on capturing those droid fighters. I want as many of them intact as we can get."

As Antilles started relaying orders, Bey sidled next to Stazi and crossed his arms. "A messy fight, but a successful one. If those Geonosians really comply we might be able to neutralize the Ssi-ruuvi war machine entirely."

"Don't get too confident, Johram. This is just the start," Stazi said, "but hopefully we've turned the tide."

He looked out on Geonosis, red and lonely against the stars, and wondered where that tide would take them next.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Darth Havok knew he had to escape Coruscant's underworld, and to do that he needed to communicate with his agents in the city above. He had no idea what they'd done since his disappearance, but he was more worried about the political and military struggle in the wider galaxy. He'd been trapped here for days, struggling to survive and fight off the constant pain from his wounds, and had no idea what the traitor's daughter Saara had done to muddle Lord Nihl's design, nor whether the campaigns in the Outer Rim were still successful.

The single advantage of his situation was that, once he donned the foul-smelled scraps of Galactic City's indigent population, none in the upper city deigned look at him twice. It was more effective than any disguise he or his Sith agents had conjured, and it allowed him to huddle in shadows on major concourses unnoticed and uncared for. He spent a complete day-cycle like that, watching the beings who came and went through a communications relay post attached to a major commercial district. It was lightly-protected compared to a government comm center but it should have the equipment he'd need to contact his agents and arrange rescue.

The comm relay was totally unguarded in the hours before dawn. Havok retreated to a lower level and allowed himself to sleep for the early part of the night, then crawled out once commerce on the avenue was dying down. He waited still, huddled unnoticed beneath his foul-smelling rags, until the once-busy pedestrian street was abandoned. Still clinging to shadow, he made his way to the relay's access panel and

began prying it open with the only tool available to him: the serving knife he'd killed two indigents with days ago. Simple leverage popped the access panel open. Havok saw a readout screen and familiar-looking controls and felt like a man who'd just been awarded a feast.

His hands dashed over the controls, first entering an encryption frequency, then commandeering the transmitter to broadcast a message to his most trusted agents. It was short and simple, telling them he was alive and needed to be picked up at this location as soon as possible.

With that done, Havok erased records of his message in the terminal's memory banks, closed the panel tight, and began to retreat to his former hiding place on the far side of the boulevard. As soon as he stepped onto the concourse he froze. On the far end he saw the clustered silhouettes of at least a dozen beings. They were distant but he used his binoculars to affirm they were moving closer. When he looked to the other end he saw five or six more, nearer still and also approaching. Havok snarled and clutched the pathetic stolen serving knife in both hands, as though that would save him.

He forced himself to be calm; he didn't know who these beings were but there was no logical reason to think they were after him. He could retreat to shadows, cover himself in rancid clothes, and pretend to be an indigent as he had these past days. He found a small alley, wedged himself between the two buildings, and pulled himself inside his dirty robe. Like this, he told himself, he was invisible.

He waited, heart pounding, still clinging absurdly to the knife. From a lightsaber to *this*, he thought pathetically. Without the Force he'd been reduced to a sniveling, foul-smelling animal hiding in shadows.

When artificial light flashed down the alley he fought the urge to run. It passed over him, then came back. He heard a voice from the alley mouth call, "Can you come out here, sir?"

Havok ignored it and prayed they'd move on. Instead he heard foots scraping into the alley, and the voice repeated, "Sir, can you please stand up and come outside?"

He waited as they drew closer. Finally, knife hidden in his filthy robes, Havok stood up and peeked over the hood's rim

to see a bland-faced young local security officer. The man said, "Sir, you're not allowed to stay here. That's trespassing."

Playing the indigent, Havok kept his head low and muttered, "Sorry, so sorry. I'll go." He didn't have to try to make his voice dry and rasping.

The security officer retreated toward the alley mouth. He was waiting for Havok to follow, but didn't seem ready to actually touch his filthy clothes. Still keeping his head low, Havok moved out onto the concourse. His side hurt yet again but he refrained from crying aloud. Once he was in the open new glowlamps flashed on him, from all sides. He held up his hands and whimpered, "Too much light, too much light."

A new voice, female, said, "Sir, can you look at me?"

"I'm sorry," he muttered, "I'll go now. I go."

Firmly the voice said, "Look at me, sir."

Keeping hands close to block his face, Havok lifted his head and allowed one eye to peer through cracked fingers. He saw a woman wearing the scarlet armor of Imperial Knight, with thin scars lacing a face topped by short red hair.

The woman brought up her blaster. "Lower your hands right now, sir. Let me see your face."

There was no choice. Havok lunged. The woman skirted back. His knife scraped uselessly over her armor as her gun pumped one stun blast into his chest.

His body twisted and agony blossomed but was quickly overcome by numbness. The last thing Havok felt was the knife slipping from his fingers. He wasn't even awake when he hit the ground.

Staring at the blank gray door to the interrogation cell, it was very difficult for Marasiah to focus on her uncle's words.

"Our medical team put him under sedation while he was still stunned," Hogrum was telling her. "He remained unconscious while they applied treatment to the blast wound in his abdomen. They say that if he had human anatomy he'd be dead by now."

"But he's awake?" She asked but dreaded the answer.

"Yes. Awake and bound."

"Has anyone spoken to him?"

“Not yet. Sia, please allow me to go in first. I can ask questions and gauge his responsiveness. If I need to, I can apply the proper tools.”

A euphemism for torture, she thought. The man inside the chamber had murdered her mother, Hogrum’s sister. She couldn’t walk away from that room, but neither could he.

Her uncle had once told her that an empress never had to explain herself. She took that advice now and whispered, “I’ll speak to him first.”

“I understand. Do you want me to monitor from outside?”

“Yes,” she said. Knowing she had an outside observer might help restrain her.

Marasiah stepped up the door, pushed it aside, and went through. She’d been told Darth Havok had removed his red-and-black Sith tattoos, but it was still jarring to look into the face of Eshkar Niin: her husband’s teacher, her father’s confidant, her mother’s friend and murderer. They were all gone but he remained; it was proof of the universe’s cruel injustice. She was surprised how weak Niin looked with ankles and wrists strapped to the bare metal chair. His shoulder had been fitted with a cast and though it was hidden by his drab gray jumpsuit, she knew the wound to his side was only partly healed.

When they’d last met he’d chained her half-naked to the stone walls of the Sith temple on Korriban. He’d tortured her and taunted her and tried to convince her that Antares was a traitor. Her mind had nearly broken then. As Marasiah looked into Niin’s hollow eyes she felt grim satisfaction.

“You should be grateful,” she said, “That I’m a kinder host than you are.”

“I’m grateful for nothing,” he rasped.

Marasiah stepped closer. She reminded herself there was nothing to fear from this man except the harm he’d already done her, and she tried to decide which of so many questions she should ask. She could ask why he’d joined the Sith and killed her mother, but she knew his justifications would only wrench her heart and spur her anger. She tried to focus on the questions of immediate importance.

“You attempted to kill Senator Porat Derrol,” she said. “Why?”

He stared up at her without answering. She reached out with the Force to read his thoughts but found them well-guarded. As a Knight and Sith both, Niin had trained his mind. Even without the Force he could still raise walls.

"We know you had dealings with the Black Sun vigo on Vorzyd V," she said, and caught small surprise on his face. "You arranged for the assassination attempt on Bavinyar to coincide with the expansion of Darth Nihl's campaign in the Outer Rim, didn't you?"

He said, "The goal was to cause chaos. It wasn't even important that you be killed."

She'd been wrong. He could still hurt her. Her heart burned at the thought that Antares had died over a ploy, an assassination attempt that wasn't even intended to succeed. "Your apprentice died on Bavinyar," she said. "Does that mean anything to you?"

"Antares was potential wasted. He had so much anger in him, but he never became Sith."

"He was a stronger man than you ever were, Niin. A *better* man." He flinched at that name but didn't correct her. "You should know we found the calls you made on the communications relay before we captured you. We're tracing your agents on Coruscant as we speak. We'll find out everything you've been doing here before we eradicate every trace of Sith poison on this planet."

It was satisfying to say, but Niin's reaction was still frustratingly guarded. Bending forward, leaning close, she said, "Tell me about Porat Derrol. Was he involved in the Bavinyar assassination?"

He said nothing and showed nothing. This was how it would be then: stoic refusal.

"We can force you to tell us," she said. "My uncle Hogrum is outside this door. You murdered his sister. He'll *enjoy* making you suffer before you talk."

"Like you then, Sia?"

His use of her pet name stirred something inside her. One hand lashed out and slapped him hard enough to turn his horned head. He turned it right back at her.

"We know you've been Nihl's agent, and that you arranged the attack at Bavinyar. We will make you suffer for all of

that, Niin, but we'll make you suffer more if you don't tell us what happened with Derrol."

Voice still dead he said, "Grief's made you cruel, Sia. Like your father."

She slapped him again, harder. She couldn't help herself. He was trying to enrage her; she'd make him sorry for it. "Tell me about Derrol. *Now*."

He stared at her, mind still guarded from the Force, and his stoic expression lapsed into a tiny, smug smile.

He could wall off his mind but not his body. Marasiah reached out with the Force and took firm hold of Niin's windpipe. She'd never done this before, not to anyone, but it came easily. She watched his neck strain as he squeezed it and felt great satisfaction at his fear. Even his walls started to crack, revealing surprise and terror.

"Talk now," she growled, "Or you will never talk again."

And she found she *didn't* want him to speak. She wanted to keep pressing, keep squeezing, keep using her building anger to crush the life from this man and finally pay back some of the pain he'd given her. For her mother's sake, for Antares, for her father and all the Knights he'd betrayed, Eshkar Niin deserved to die in agony. As she pressed harder on his throat she couldn't think of a single reason not to administer long-deserved justice right here, right now.

Words squeaked out of his throat: "Wait, please."

With great reluctance, she relaxed her grip. "Was Derrol involved with Bavinyar?"

Niin rebuilt the walls around his mind and asked, "Do you want to know why I killed your mother?"

She breathed deep and tried to contain her rage. "Answer my question."

"I killed her because I loved her," rasped Niin, "And to become Sith, I had to kill what I loved."

He lowered his walls enough for her to know the truth. She felt the echo of Niin's internal havoc and the thrill of Havok's triumph. It roused anger like she'd never known and she grabbed his neck with both hands. Muscle and cartilage felt good beneath her palms and she squeezed. Niin twisted his face in stoic resolve but kept his eyes on her, daring her to snap his neck and kill him here and now.

And she wanted to. For all the pain he'd given her and her family and all the Knights he deserved justice and justice deserved to be agonizing. Anger inside her welled to the surface and became crackling energy that burned off her hands and scattered across Niin's body. His mouth dropped open and his face wrenched in pain as her hate took physical form and began rending him cell by cell. With her attack his walls fell completely. His terror and fear were a joy to experience, just as it was a joy to have him at her mercy after so many years.

"Sia, wait!" a voice called behind her.

She jerked her hands off Niin's throat and turned. The cell door was open, her uncle's black-cloaked form filling the space. More restrained, he said, "Can I speak to you outside?"

Marasiah looked at her trembling hand and saw sparks die between her fingertips.

Grief's made you cruel, Sia. Like your father.

She shuddered and hurried out of the room. She couldn't bear to look at Niin again. Once they were outside, the cell door shut, her uncle said, "I'm sorry, but you lost control in there."

"I know, Uncle." She locked her hands together, afraid of what they might do next. "Niin... Darth Havok... He was..."

"He was baiting you into killing him," Hogrum said. "He wants to die with all his knowledge. We can't let that happen. We need to find Derrol's role in this."

"I let my anger take control, just like he wanted... Uncle, I was going dark..."

He gripped her shoulders. "You have every right to hate him, and to want him punished. So do I. But we can't do it yet. We need proof before we kill him. *Then* we can make him suffer."

Hogrum's voice held all the bitterness and rage she'd felt minutes ago, and she recoiled from his touch. "I can't condone that kind of thinking. I won't. It destroyed my father."

"You're *stronger* than him, Sia. You won't make his mistakes. I know that. You're like your mother. You will never falter."

She wished she could believe that. Right now she only knew that she'd stood on the same precipice as Roan Fel, and only her uncle's chance intervention had kept her from plunging off.

Marasiah took a deep breath and straightened her robes. "Uncle... You were right. I can't do this interrogation, not now. Please... Handle it for me."

"I'd be glad to."

"But do *not* torture him."

"Sia-"

"I mean it." She shifted a hand to his arm. "You're still an Imperial Knight, even if you can't feel the Force. And you're the only family I have left. I won't have you going to the dark."

"Niin's mental resistance is formidable. You've felt that already. Administering pain is the only way to break his resistance and get the truth."

"You'd enjoy giving him pain. Don't lie. I would too. We can't become like that." Like the Sith. Like her father. She couldn't. As one of the last Force-users left in the galaxy it was all the more important that she hold the line and stay true to the light. She had to make sure her Knights followed that rule too, even now. She shifted her hand to touch his. "Please, Uncle. Promise me."

Like Niin, he was a master at hiding his true feelings in the Force, but he said, "Yes. I promise."

"Thank you." She squeezed and released. "Do what you must... I need to be alone right now."

He'd been deprived of everything: his weapons, his loyal agents, even the Force. They'd broken his body and strapped him to a chair and left him to be tortured, but Darth Havok was still a Sith. He believed that because he had to. It was the only thing he had left.

When the door opened next, Hogrum Chalk stepped inside. He'd been expecting that. The man seemed to glide across the floor, body hidden beneath wrapped black robes. When they'd both been Imperial Knights he'd had a hard time getting sense of the man. Hogrum was intelligent and meticulous but very private. Havok had sensed the man

loved his older sister deeply, and as Elliah's killer he expected no mercy.

Very likely, he would die in this room. He tried not to be afraid. He was a Sith, he told himself. He could turn even death to his advantage.

"How is Sia?" he asked. "Is she still upset?"

Hogrum loomed above him, formless black topped by a scarred, scowling face. His mechanical eye glowed red in the chamber's gloom. "You won't hurt the empress any longer."

"I've hurt her enough. And you. You'll kill me, won't you?"

"Yes. I will."

"And you'll enjoy it."

"Yes. But I need information from you first."

"Sia said she's dismantling my spy network as we speak. Or is that a lie?"

"It's happening, but it will take time. You'll know more than any of them, Niin."

The use of his old name rankled, but Havok hid annoyance. "She sent you to torture me, didn't you? You'll be able to make me talk without staining yourself with the dark side of the Force. That's so... convenient for her."

"Sia ordered me *not* to torture you."

"How virtuous. She's like Elliah, isn't she?"

Part of Hogrum's robes peeled away, revealing the silver lightsaber hooked to his belt. His hand moved past it and removed something else; a smaller metal cylinder, outwardly plain, but containing a dozen retractable blades, needles, and other instruments of pain. Havok knew torture devices.

Fear surged but he tamed it. Hogrum was willing to counter the empress' orders. That was interesting. He had to use it somehow.

The scarred man tapped a recessed button on the cylinder and extended a thick needle as long as his forefinger. He held it out so the blunted tip pressed against the center of Havok's chest and said, "Tell me how you arranged for the assassination attempt on Bavinyar. Explain every word."

Havok needed time to think. Marasiah had already explained that they'd traced him to Vorzyd V, which had been a mistake on her part. It gave him truth to twist into a

lie. He knew Hogrum was impatient, and as his mind raced he braced himself for the pain he knew would come.

Hogrum didn't wait. The device's electric charge was worse than Marasiah's untrained use of Force lightning. The concentrated burst pumped out through the center of his chest; if he'd had the same physiology as a human it would have been enough to stop his heart.

The pain lasted less than ten seconds and erased all thought. When Hogrum pulled the shocker back, Havok slumped in his chair and shuddered with echoed pain. His mind worked desperately.

He couldn't give his enemies the full truth. He'd deny them that victory. He had to give Hogrum the lie he wanted to believe, but Elliah's brother was so obscure, so guarded, Havok had never understood his desires.

But Elliah. There was a place to start. Hogrum would want revenge for his sister, but what else?

The human moved his shocker over to Havok's strapped-down right hand. That kind of pain would paralyze half his body. The Sith stalled him, "Darth Nihl gave me the order... I went to Vorzyd and spoke with the vigo. Pleshchai. I convinced him that chaos on Coruscant was in Black Sun's interests. He agreed to set up the assassination."

"When was this? Be specific. How many days before the attack?"

Havok strained to remember. Hogrum stabbed the shocker into his hand. His entire arm trembled uncontrollably in its binds and his right side shuddered with uncontrollable pain. He looked at his captor and saw a tiny, satisfied smile on the man's mouth. Oh yes, he was enjoying this in a way Marasiah would never allow. Hogrum was not like Elliah. He was different from his sister entirely.

Peeling lips from teeth in a bitter grin, he told the human, "You didn't give me time to think."

"How long?" Hogrum repeated.

"That was... five standard days before the attack."

"Where did you go then?"

"Coruscant. I came here."

Hogrum placed the shocker over the same hand. "Tell me about Coruscant. What did you do here?"

Havok remembered Marasiah's pressing on Porat Derrol and realized Hogrum wanted the same information. His thoughts turned to the Chagrian senator and then his wife. With everything else he'd almost forgotten them, a foolish mistake.

He could explain the truth. Hogrum would surely take down Saarai and her husband and whatever they were planning together. It would satisfy Havok's desire to see Wyyrlok's daughter ruined, yet he couldn't end with just that. Victory over one enemy would be no victory if it came through surrender to another.

Hogrum stabbed his arm again. As he twisted in electric agony, Havok told himself he was a Sith, he made pain his tool. He turned it into a silent mantra as the residual shocks rippled through his body.

"Coruscant," Hogrum said. He stepped back as though to admire his work, then retracted the shocker into the cylinder. He extended another torture tool: a simple stiletto blade. "Tell me what you did on *Coruscant*."

The man seemed convinced Black Sun's assassins had gotten help from the capital. That meant he believed Senator Derrol, at least, had been complicit, maybe other senators. Maybe Derrol's old commander, Gar Stazi. It had been Vigo Pleshchai's clever stroke to hire a down-and-out Alliance soldier to shoot at Marasiah, and Havok could exploit that gift farther still.

He could see it all now. Hogrum had always been rigorous, but his rigor had become paranoia. The Alliance's great victory in the senate vote must have strengthened it.

Havok realized what he could give Hogrum, but if he wanted it to be believable he couldn't make it easy. Pain still twitching through his body, he said, "I admit it. About Derrol."

Hogrum leaned in held the blade centimeters from Havok's face. Its lethal gleam stirred more fear but like a Sith he converted it to strength. "Why did he shoot at you?"

First he had to coat one lie in another. "I didn't go there... because of Derrol. I wanted to test their security, but he saw me in the garage and recognized me as an intruder. To run into a soldier like that... the Force has truly left me."

Hogrum flipped his weapon to an underhand grip and pounded it into the back of Havok's hand. It was worse pain than anything and his whole body bucked and twisted in the chair. Dark blood spurted out and leaked onto the armrest but the stiletto plugged most of the wound.

It took several minutes before Havok could speak. Hogrum waited patiently, hands once more hidden beneath his cloak.

Through his agony the Sith grunted, "Sia... would not approve of this."

"The empress is an idealist, like her mother. Someone has to take the burdens she can't." Havok heard a protective streak, but a ruthless and cynical one. Fitting for a man who'd lost his beloved sister to betrayal.

"This isn't a burden... You're enjoying this."

Hogrum admitted it with a simple nod. "Why were you *really* going to see Derrol?"

Havok had planned to draw Hogrum out more, bait him with more lies until he finally gave the man one he'd be happy to accept. The blade through his hand sent agony through his body; he'd barely managed the initial burst without passing out and didn't know how much more he could stand. When he risked a glance at his hand he saw it surrounded by pooling blood.

Fighting pain and nausea he looked to Hogrum. "I hadn't heard from him... since Bavinyar, I was going to confront him, make sure he was still loyal. I got... my answer, didn't it?"

Hogrum didn't bite the bait immediately. "Derrol fought for seven years against the Sith. Why would he join you now?"

"Do I have the face of a Sith? No. He never knew. Only that we... had the same enemy.... You... and Sia."

"Tell me what Derrol did. Tell me *exactly*."

"Kagar Aynes... He worked for Pleshchai. Very low muscle. Vigo Pleshchai saw his connection with Derrol. He recommended I talk to the senator, get him to convince Aynes."

Hogrum did mental calculation. "You met with Derrol immediately after you arrived from Vorzyd?"

“Yes. Right away. We knew we only had a little time... I spoke with Derrol in private... and Derrol convinced Aynes.”

“So Derrol knew exactly what he was doing?”

“*Death to all tyrants,*” Havok rasped Aynes’ suicide note. “Of course he knew... Him at least...”

Hogrum was already calculating what he’d do with his information. Havok could see that. He’d move against Derrol, whether the empress approved or not. It would be enough to ruin the senator, surely. As for Saarai... Perhaps she’d be caught up in the sweep. Her activity in the senator’s favor was well-known. Even if she wasn’t caught, she’d lose her husband and her tool. At best she’d be reduced to a nobody once again. It wasn’t as satisfying as destroying her entirely, but it was still a victory.

An even better one would be breaking the coalition that had toppled Krayt. Havok hissed, “Derrol... is still close to Stazi. I have proof.”

“Instead of hearsay?” Hogrum said skeptically. “What kind of proof?”

“Derrol met Stazi. In private. Sulking in an alley in the night. I trailed Derrol and found them together. I recorded it on my binoculars.” Body still twitching in pain, he hissed laughter. “When I fell... I lost my comm, my lightsaber, everything I needed, but not the binoculars... Isn’t that funny?”

Hogrum looked at him thoughtfully, then turned without a word. The door opened, his black-robed body passed through, and it closed tight again. Havok was still strapped to his chair with a knife punched through his hand. He was losing blood and nothing could block the pain of his wound. He was trapped and might die soon but still smiled to himself, alone in the last room he’d ever see. He’d conquered his pain and used his enemy’s desire against him. The fracturing Federation would break itself.

Some time later- minutes had no meaning for Havok, not now- Hogrum Chalk returned. He came in alone. He looked down at Havok in silence and the Sith couldn’t read his expression. Pain, stress and blood loss had made him weary.

It was a struggle to focus his eyes on the scarred face above him.

“What did you think you’d gain by telling us the truth?”

Hogrum sounded genuinely interested. Havok hadn’t been prepared for the question, but a response came easily. “Satisfaction. At least now... I can see your Federation fall apart... Some revenge for Darth Krayt.”

“I won’t allow that to happen.” He said it with conviction.

“But Sia will want justice for Draco’s death... Won’t she?”

“She’ll get justice.” Hogrum’s cloak pulled back. There was no torture tool hooked to his belt, only the lightsaber. He drew it out and thumbed it on, extended the long white blade. “I won’t let you have the satisfaction of seeing it.”

This was it, then. The lies and deceptions, confusions and transformations, all to end here. It wasn’t the fate Eshkar Niin had imagined when he’d joined the Sith, but he’d been a Sith to the end, transmuting his pain and twisting his enemies so they warred each other.

It was something to be proud of, Havok thought, as the vengeful blade flashed final white.

Chapter Twenty-Five

When he heard of the disaster on Geonosis, Darth Nihl's first urge had been to commit murder. The object of his wrath didn't matter, only the release of violent rage. He forced calm on himself; when he'd had the Force to draw on, giving into anger had unlocked his fullest power. Without it, anger could overwhelm proper judgement, and he needed to think clearly as he planned a reaction.

Losing Geonosis and its droid brain factories was a severe blow, possibly a fatal one. Neither the Nagai nor the Ssi-ruuk had the ability to replicate those artificial minds, and while the Ssi-ruuk still possessed thousands of the tiny battle droids ready to fight, they could no longer throw them at the enemy as they had. Eventually the supply would run down, and with it the Ssi-ruuk's ability to wage war. Nihl would have to search out other partners who could supply control systems for the droids on a massive scale- the Collicoids, perhaps- but that would take months.

He'd heard that Geonosis had been taken mostly intact, and that its Council of Hives was ready to comply with Gar Stazi's occupying force. That was no surprise; during their negotiations, Duke Serac Kor had struck Nihl as an opportunistic merchant, nothing more. He'd do anything the Federation asked to keep his title. This might even include giving them a key to deactivating the war droids. Serac Kor had insisted that none existed and claimed each droid was an autonomous unit, but Nihl had only his word to go on.

His grand conquest of the Outer Rim, which had looked so certain a day ago, was suddenly on the edge of collapse.

When he wrestled his anger under control Nihl considered his options carefully. His forces were stretched thin as it was, and a new offensive was out of the question. The newly-captured Javin sector had key resources and industrial centers and was a prize worth holding, but the Federation was likely to counter-attack there next. Excursions down the Hydian Way, including a push toward Eriadu and Seswenna, would have to be cancelled.

Depending on where the Federation acted, he was ready to withdraw forces from some worlds, effectively surrendering them, which he knew the Ssi-ruuk wouldn't like. The saurians were hungry for conquest and could be difficult to reason with.

The Javin sector might be first in line for a counterattack but there were other systems worth defending. Bakura, whose repulsor-coil factories had started output again, was first among them. It was, Nihl decided, a place to marshal his armies and watch the next fight. He made contact with Darth Vurik, commanding the forces entrenched on Javin, and told him to be ready. He spoke with the Nagai and Ssi-ruuvi commanders as well, ordered some to fall back and fortify Bakura while others joined Vurik and prepared to defend. Finally he spoke with Yaga Auchs, who'd completed the conquest of Beshin. The Mandalore's forces were to hold their newly-gained territory to a man, and any desertion would be severely punished. He left the obvious threat unspoken.

Once he'd done all that, Nihl felt better; not less angry, but at least more in control. His desire for recompense remained, and after some consideration he decided how best to get it.

Since coming to Bakura he'd spent most of his time aboard his flagship *Krish'nakt* and in the former Bakura Defense Force headquarters. He'd not visited the executive pyramid at all, but when he entered President Recado's office for the first time and saw the perfect view of Salis D'aar's spread-out cityscape, he decided it was the perfect place for a show.

Recado was being kept in one of the pyramid's lower layers, as was Shado Vao. Nihl had them both brought to the office, and when they were marched in by a troupe of red-scaled Ssi-ruuk the Sith Lord was waiting, standing before the

president's desk. Every datacard, stack of flimsy, and personal memento remained untouched from before the occupation. No one had bother to disrupt it.

Nihl hadn't bothered to see the president either. The old human, short and bald, looked appropriately unimportant and when he saw Nihl occupying his office he didn't even bother to rouse an objection. Shado Vao held himself with fragile dignity, and Nihl knew it would take only a small blow to make the fragile Jedi crack. Fortunately, he had something large in mind.

"Master Vao had explained who you are," said Recado. "I'm surprised you're still on Bakura. I thought you'd be off conquering other worlds."

"There have been setbacks." Nihl had no reason to hide them. Once his prisoners understood his losses, they'd be able to understand their own. "The Federation has captured the world critical to making Ssi-ruuvi war droids. How they learned we had a base there, I don't know. As a result, I've been forced to halt my planned offensive and regroup."

"How terrible for you," Recado said dryly.

"I didn't ask for your pity, or your sarcasm." Nihl walked a slow circle to the back of the desk. "I want you to understand who I am."

"You're a Sith Lord," said the president. "And even without the Force you're spreading misery and death everywhere, because that's what Sith do, isn't it? Master Vao explained it to me. It's all very pathetic."

Nihl was surprised by his insolence and he wondered whether Recado was asking to be killed. "I am now what I've always been, except wiser and better. Losing the Force just revealed who I was all along." He smiled sharply. "As it has revealed the Jedi for what *they've* been all along. Especially Shado Vao."

The Twi'lek said nothing. He didn't even flinch.

Nihl ran his hands over the desktop. He ruffled a sheet of papers, then gathered a datacard in his palm and crushed it. Petty vandalism didn't stir Recado; the president still looked like he was waiting for execution. Nihl then picked a small placard off the desk, and oval with two halves divided by diagonal line, one colored pure black and the other white.

"I know this symbol," the told the prisoners, and something lit in Recado's eyes. "Belief in the Cosmic Balance is quite common on Bakura, isn't it?"

"You're a savage," the human scoffed. "What do you know about the Balance?"

"When the Sith trained me, they told me about many schools and religions. They wanted to show me the error of those ways." He picked up the Balance plaque and held it up. "However, I've always had a little sympathy for this one."

"Did you like the color scheme?"

Nihl ran a hand down his black-and-white body. "Perhaps I did. But this Balance of yours... It is a cruel faith, isn't it? Every life is balanced by a death. Desire is balanced by despair. The good intention behind a deed is balanced by the tragedy that results." He looked to Vao. "Have you gained an appreciation for the Balance, Master Jedi?"

He said nothing, but the Sith was rewarded with a look of pure hatred.

"Not so Jedi any more, perhaps," Nihl said. "Perhaps darkness and light *are* fated to be balanced out. Maybe the Force itself balances that way. An era of peace and light leads to one of darkness and conflict. Yes, I do like that idea."

"Is there a point to this?" asked Recado.

Nihl stepped around the desk, still clutching the Balance symbol. "There is, actually. I understand that before you surrendered, Mister President, you were given the option to destroy Bakura's factories and all the P'w'eck inside. You'd have taken many lives and ruined Bakura's economy for a generation, but you'd have deprived us of industry badly needed to keep our war effort going. In other words, our victory over Bakura would be countered by the loss of its most valuable asset. That had to appeal to you, as a follower of the Balance. But you *didn't* destroy those factories. I was wondering why." Nihl stepped close to the Jedi and the president. "Maybe Master Vao convinced you of a better path."

Recado sighed. "The Jedi had nothing to do with it. I made the choice on my own."

"And why didn't you hurt us like we'd just hurt you?"

“Because they said you’re merciful when planets surrender. I wanted to protect Bakura from harm. All of it.”

“And because you hoped the Federation would rush in and drive us away?”

“That too,” he muttered.

“And does that seems strange to you? Have you wondered why I, a Sith, would be merciful?”

“Now that you mention it, it seems unusual.”

Nihl looked to the Jedi, still silent, still fragile. He drew back toward the window. “You give them mercy, they cower before you because they’re afraid of what happens when you take it away. I learned that from Darth Krayt. It was his favored method.”

“He forgot that with Dac.”

“Yes. He did, and it turned the galaxy against him. I only have the resources to conquer a slice of what Krayt did, but I’ll use what I have to the fullest.”

“I’m so glad for you.”

Recado’s weary cynicism was becoming annoying. That meant it was time to unsettle him, and to break Shado Vao. Nihl removed a comlink from his belt and tapped it on. To *Krish’nakt*’s crew he said, “Begin the bombardment.”

His prisoners tensed. Their eyes went wide but Nihl turned away. He had greater things to savor.

The first turbolaser volley landed on the southern outskirts of Salis D’aar. From the office window the point of impact was obscured by high skyscrapers, but black smoke immediately rose to fill a quarter of the sky and licks of flame were visible between buildings. A second volley came ten seconds later, further south. The third blast was closer, and the entire office trembled as the concussive force rattled the ground beneath it.

“Stop this,” Recado croaked. “I beg you, please-”

The next blast landed so close they could see the first explosion. Tall buildings tipped and fell, crashing into one another and spreading a chain of devastation throughout the city. By now the entire sky was filled with black smoke and rising flame. The next impacts were further away, but they still shook the palace and sent curtains of ash through the sky.

“Why are you doing this?” Recado croaked. “What’s the point?”

“Balance,” Nihl grinned fiercely. “The Federation gains a world. *You* lose one.”

“But the factories-”

“Are being spared. My gunners are good shots, Mister President. They won’t harm any of the P’w’eck districts of the city either. And rest assured, this is happening to every major city on Bakura.”

“But the smoke, the fires-”

“May be difficult to control,” Nihl shrugged. “You should have bombed those factories while you had the chance. Then you might have swayed balance in your favor. But then, like a *Jedi*,” he snarled the word like a curse- “you stepped back and trusted good intentions to save your world. You’re as pathetic as Shado Vao. You deserve the same fate.”

The city continued to rumble with the gasp of flames and the thunder of distant impacts, but per Nihl’s orders, his gunners were concentrating on the city’s outskirts, where they’d be sure not to damage necessary infrastructure. The death toll would be catastrophic, but knowing that satisfied Nihl less than the looks on the faces of the men before him.

Recado’s shock and anger had fallen away. His head hung low and his eyes were empty. The slaughter seemed to have robbed him of everything, even will. Shado Vao was different. He looked on the verge of screaming, and he was restraining himself only to spare Nihl the satisfaction.

The Sith Lord had satisfaction enough. Clutching the Balance symbol to his chest, Nihl turned to watch the result of Recado’s efforts and Shado’s goodwill. The storm of smoke and fire rose high and blocked out the midday sun, draping the city in a perfect night.

Ania sat in *Free Agent*’s cockpit, alone but ringed by electric ghosts. It was as motley a collection as she’d ever spoken with. Her mother was the most familiar, tight-casting from her nearby ship. Yaga Auchs, many light-years away, joined the conversation, and though he’d removed his helmet he still looked fearsome for his *beskar* shoulder-plates. Finally there was Admiral Gar Stazi, hero of the Galactic

Alliance and co-leader of the Federation, connected from his flagship over Geonosis.

Though all three holo-images had faces turned to Ania, she could tell Stazi was staring hard at Auchs as he said, "You have to be absolutely sure about this. Darth Nihl is at Bakura."

"The intel I gave you on Geonosis was good, wasn't it?"

"It was. That's why I'm trusting your advice now. The bulk of our forces are engaged in the Javin sector. I can't afford to pull any away without being sure."

"Nihl's at Bakura. I spoke to him personally. I don't know how long he'll stay, so you'd better act fast. I recommend *not* taking any ships out of Javin. You might tip him off. From what I can tell, he's been able to track their movements really well. Don't ask me his sources, but they're good."

"I've gathered that already," Stazi said sourly. "The forces I have with me now may be enough to take Bakura. I need full intelligence on what Nihl has present."

"I can get you that when I go to Bakura."

"How does that work?" asked Ania. "You said Nihl ordered you to stay at Javin."

"He did. And the bulk of my Mandos will do that. But Nihl has to be taken out and I'm not trusting anyone to do that besides me."

"I appreciate your hands-on command style," Stazi said, "But if you show up at Bakura for no reason, Nihl will be suspicious."

"I know. That's why I'm going to need help getting close."

His holo-image shifted, and Ania could tell he was looking at her and her mother. Walking into an enemy stronghold was never a good plan, but they'd pledged to help Auchs take down Nihl. Now they were being asked to go through with.

"Nihl might consider me a prize," Marin said, "Given that I can still use the Force."

Stazi's eyes grew bigger in surprise, but Auchs snorted, "I'm really curious myself as to how that works."

"It's a personal secret. But it would definitely get Nihl interested."

"That doesn't explain why I'd fly all the way to Bakura to deliver you. If you're my captive I'll need a good

explanation how I captured you. If you're just some Force-user I found in my troops Nihl will wonder why I didn't notice you before. He'll also wonder how I managed to keep you captive. Either way, it will make him suspicious."

"I'm trying to fulfill my part of the bargain," Marin insisted. "And my Force powers give me an edge over Nihl."

Ania heard the resolve in her mother's voice. She was determined to go to Bakura no matter the danger, and Ania knew not to try and talk her out of it. Instead a different idea came to mind. It was risky and stupid and might well get her killed unnecessarily, just like everything else she'd been doing lately, but like everything else it felt like a compulsion.

"I can be your captive," she said.

Marin's eyes went wide. Auchs' narrowed in thought. "What's so special about you?"

"I'm Ania Solo. I killed Darth Wredd. I led the One Sith to the Floating World where most of them got slaughtered. I figure a guy like Nihl's not going to let a chance for revenge go, especially if you hand it to him personally."

"That's too dangerous," Marin said. "Ania, I can't guarantee your safety."

"Yeah, I know. But I figure a prisoner like me is going to need a couple extra guards. When he looks at you Nihl's not going to see anything except a Mando in red armor. If we're going to get this to work we'll need surprise on our side."

As Marin grudgingly considered, Auchs said, "This plan has potential. I should be able to get Nihl more or less alone. We take him out, then either escape or bunker down and wait for the admiral here to chase the Ssi-ruuk off Bakura."

"This is a fascinating ploy," Stazi said, "And while I'd be glad to see Nihl dead, I still need to deal with his fleets. Which, I must point out, consist of a considerable Mandalorian contingent."

"Simple. We're mercenaries and we enjoy getting paid. We can switch sides or retreat, depending on what you're willing to pay. Either way, we can time it with then we take out Nihl."

"This scenario seems familiar." Stazi's voice lowered to a growl. "I was involved with the Botajef operation, you know.

I remember the confusion your withdrawal caused, Mandalore. And the lives it cost.”

“I’m willing to do the same thing this time, only in *your* favor. There’s a little poetry to it, isn’t there?”

“There will be, if you prove trustworthy.”

“I gave you Geonosis.”

“Yes. Your intentions against the Sith certainly seem genuine...”

“They are,” Marin said with the kind of conviction only possible through Force powers. It took Auchs by surprise.

“Then it seems I will have to trust you,” Stazi said. “I won’t launch an attack on Bakura until I have confirmation that Nihl is dead or captured.”

“I’ll be in constant contact with my ship,” Auchs said. “They’ll be in contact with you. If you don’t get confirmation, don’t jump in. Simple as that.”

“Nothing here is simple, but I do appreciate your willingness to take personal risks. Very well. I suppose now we should talk payment.”

Auchs gave a brittle smile. “Music my ears.”

The mercenary and the admiral haggled services and prices for the next few minutes, leaving Marin and Ania to watch. When they finished the conversation wound up. Stazi closed his link first, then Auchs, and then it was just Ania speaking to her mother in the holo’s soft blue glow.

“You didn’t have to volunteer for that,” Marin said.

“Maybe not. But it keeps up the pattern, doesn’t it?”

Her mother smiled sadly. “Ania, when this is over... I promise you’ll be free of all this. You won’t owe me anything anymore.”

“I’m not doing this because I owe you. Nihl needs to be taken down for the sake of the galaxy. And I’ve got some experience with Sith Lords.”

“You don’t need to be the one to take the shot this time.”

“I know.”

“I’ll protect you from Nihl. And Auchs, if I have too.”

Ania’s forced optimism wilted. “You think it will come to that?”

“It’s possible. Be ready for anything.”

“I will.”

The holo shut off, plunging Ania into the dark. The full magnitude of what she'd committed herself to chilled her, and she forced herself out of her seat. She heard AG-37 and Sauk down the hall in the crew hold, talking quietly. She'd need to explain to them why this was one mission she absolutely couldn't take them on. They'd be disappointed, especially AG-37, but this was the last time she'd take this kind of risk. Her mother had promised her, and Ania had every intention to see it fulfilled.

When the connection close Yaga turned from the communications console to his daughter, who'd been watching it all from the corner of the room. In his view the talk had gone well. It had always been his intention to turn every gun of every ship in the Mando fleet against the Sith. They'd be nestled tight with the Nagai and Ssi-ruuk when they switched sides, and he'd gathered a pretty reliable list of which Nagai vessels hosted Sith captains. By prioritizing those ships and destroying them with help from the Alliance, he could finally be free of the Sith and their power over him. Like a good mercenary, he'd haggled out a good price from Admiral Stazi for a job he was going to do anyway.

This mad scheme just might work, but Sora's guarded posture conveyed skepticism.

"This is a lot of trust to be putting in people who tried to kill you a day ago," she said.

"We all want Nihl gone. When you have common interest and high stakes, you don't need trust."

She didn't look convinced and he didn't blame her. "*Buir*, these Skiratas know what you did at Botajef. If Rhal or Zerimar or anyone else finds out—"

"They'll never get proof. That's why we're going after Nihl. I'll make sure of it."

"They'll still come after you when this is over. If not this Skirata woman, then Hondo Karr or the Vevacs. They'll keep trying to undermine you. Maybe get someone close to betray you."

He stepped up and put hands on her shoulders. She was out of *beskar* and they felt small and vulnerable under his palms. The need to protect his daughter, never far gone, came back

strong. "I can watch my own back. I always have. This Skirata woman... I think she means to keep the bargain. I'm hoping she'll be able to keep Karr and Vevac off our backs once Nihl's gone."

"Then you trust that witch."

Witch. It was the perfect word, yet not. He never kept secrets from his daughter, but he hadn't yet told her that the red-armored woman who'd taken her captive on Bepin was the same one who'd murdered his father. For all his life she'd been a Force-using monster who could summon in him all the anger and fear he normally kept restrained. Yet now, after forty years, he finally saw her with mask off and she was just a tired old woman with regret in her eyes.

Empathy wasn't one of Yaga Auch's strong points. He'd trained himself not to feel it for anyone outside his family. He'd shed no tears for Marin Skirata's pain and if he had to, he'd gun her down to protect himself. But he felt he understood her, just a little; enough for a tentative trust.

"Right now we need each other. Once Nihl is gone, we might *still* need her. If we don't, we'll decide what to do with her then."

Sora looked unconvinced, but she nodded. "I'm coming with you to Bakura."

"I know you are." With Nihl anything could happen and anything might be revealed. Sora was the only person in the galaxy he trusted absolutely.

When he released her shoulders she asked, "When do we tell Nihl about his gift?"

"Not yet. First we confirm the admiral's down payment. Then we inform the troops."

"They're not going to like switching sides in the middle of a fight."

"They've done it before," he said. This second time they might even do it right.

Chapter Twenty-Six

When Kyra emerged from unconscious she didn't understand where she was or how she'd gotten here.

She was on her side, staring at a blank gray bulkhead. Metal stun cuffs pinned her wrists behind her back and the slight tingling at the ends of her limbs confirmed that she'd been hit by a stun blast. Certainty brought more memory: the flash of blue light from Jariah's blaster and the thump of impact in the center of her chest, followed by fast-blossoming numbness that had consumed her. She also remembered the shock of Jariah's last words, their causal cruelty, and the hard pressure of the young Sith's forearm on her neck.

She remembered Jao, cut deep with a red lightsaber, and that mattered more than anything. With an effort, Kyra rolled away from the bulkhead, onto her back, then onto her other side. Jao was there, lying face-up on a bench along the opposite wall of this small chamber. She kicked out, put feet on the floor, and staggered across the room. Weak legs buckled beneath her, but she made it to Jao's side.

He made no response as she fell to her knees. His eyes stared unseeing at the ceiling but his breath rose slowly up and down. She looked at his side and saw that his torn clothing had been peeled away and a few bandages had been applied to the wound. She hesitated, then turned around and, hands still behind back, awkwardly peeled away one bandage. She saw it had been merely slapped across the lightsaber-carved gash. Her stomach churned at the sight of burnt flesh and she stuck the bandage back on.

Kyra struggled to calm herself and assess the situation. They were on a ship. She listened to the faint sound of air cycling through vents and the distant sound of engines. Those were sublight thrusters, and they seemed to be at low power. No inertia rocked the room. They were in steady orbit or maybe deep space. Waiting for something.

She recalled more of the fight on Tython. Jariah had stunned the Twi'lek Sith, Darth Talon. The young human, the one who couldn't have been much older than her, had stabbed Jao, grabbed Kyra, and apparently somehow escaped with them to his ship. She didn't know what happened to Jariah and she found it hard to care. In her last scraps of memory he was callous and cruel.

The Sith had them captive. He was holding them here as he waited for something. He'd surely have some way to monitor his prisoners, but when she looked around she noticed no camera lens.

Since there seemed no other way, Kyra stood up, walked on steadier steps to the door, then slammed her less-sore shoulder into it.

She slammed again, then shouted, "Help! We need help in here! Please! He needs medical attention!"

She turned around and tried cracking the rims of her cuffs against the door. She jammed it with her shoulder again and shouted some more. After five minutes her throat had gotten sore and her limbs hurt. She sat back on her bench and gathered strength for another round.

That was when the door opened. The young man was standing in the middle. Back on Tython he'd seemed fierce and dangerous, but when Kyra's eyes lit on him she thought he looked tired. Bags gathered under his dark eyes and black hair was a messy smear around his face. In his hand he held a lightsaber, and with the tap of a thumb the red blade shot out in front of him, dispelling any impression of weakness.

"Please," she said, voice cracking. "Jao needs a medkit. He'll die if we don't help him."

She couldn't say he might well die already. She'd been given some field medic training over the past year, mostly by Jao himself. Without the Force, he'd told her, they needed all the practical help they could get.

The Sith stared at her, not even glancing at Jao. She repeated, "He'll die. Then you won't be able to use him as a hostage. *Please*, let me help him. He's my..."

She halted. The Sith pressed, "Your what?"

"My teacher," she said weakly. He almost was, or should have been.

"Were you an Imperial Knight? A Jedi?"

"No." She shook her head. "I was... I was going to be something. It doesn't matter. He needs *help*."

The Sith regarded her, "This ship has a medical droid. It's not first-class, but it's better than a medkit."

"Then *help* him." Kyra leaned forward. "*Please*. He's no good to you dead."

The Sith glanced at Jao, finally, but his lightsaber stayed angled at Kyra. She didn't even think of trying to charge him. He looked back at her and gave a tiny nod. As he reached into his pocket with his free hand and drew a comlink she felt weak with relief and had to remind herself that she was still being held captive by a murderous Sith.

The young man gave a few short orders via comlink, and a minute later a droid floated over his shoulder and into the room. The spherical medical robot was the size of a human head, with a half-dozen multi-tool appendages dangling from its lower side. The droid hovered over Jao, examined him, then began peeling away the bandages, revealing his black-scorched gash to the open air.

"Lightsaber wound, lower abdomen," the droid's tinny voice recited the obvious. "Well within registered protocols."

"Treat him," the Sith said.

"Affirmative," chirped the droid. "Will begin interior micro-sutures followed by surface-level bacta salve."

Kyra sagged against the bulkhead. Jao's injuries had stirred her with a primal panic. Over the past year he'd become more than a mentor; he was the best friend she had and the closest thing left to family. Being helpless to save those she cared about was like being back on Svivren all over again, trapped by blood and ash and senseless death.

She still didn't know if Jao would survive. When she turned her head to the Sith, still standing there with his red light-

saber, she reminded herself that trust was something she could hardly afford.

"Where are we?" Kyra asked. "I can tell we're not in hyperspace." The Sith pointedly ignored her and watched the droid work on Jao. "Your master, Darth Talon, isn't here, is she? Skywalker has her, doesn't he?"

"Skywalker," the young man said, "Doesn't even have *himself* now."

After everything else she'd practically forgotten. "But you left your master with them, didn't you?"

Pointedly avoiding her eyes, he nodded. "I didn't kill your other friend. The one who shot you."

"He's not my friend," she said, quiet but firm.

He finally regarded her. "What's your name?"

She hesitated, but silence meant nothing. She was no one important, never had been and never would be. Her name meant nothing. "I'm Kyra," she said. "Just Kyra. That's Jao Assam. Imperial Knight."

"I know who he is. I've met everyone in your group at Te Hasa... except you."

She recalled Skywalker's story about capturing Talon and her apprentice. "I was in Gree space then too. I guess we just missed each other." After a pause she asked, "Am I going to get your name?"

The Sith hesitated as she had. Then he said, "Eli Horn."

Kyra recalled something else Skywalker had said; that he'd known Talon's apprentice when they were both students on Ossus. "You used to be a Jedi padawan."

Horn flinched, and his face screwed tight. "I barely remember that."

He looked young and transparent, and she intuited something else. "You're trying to get your master back, aren't you? We're waiting in orbit over Tython, right?"

He ignored her. Understanding that she wouldn't get any more answers out of Horn, Kyra rested shoulders against the bulkhead and watched the medical droid work in silence. From this angle Kyra couldn't see much of its grisly work, which was fine by her. She waited until it withdrew its metal appendages from Jao's side, hovered high over the prone body and announced, "Operation complete. Internal micro-

sutures are installed. Bacta bandages have been replaced and will need changing every six hours.”

“So he’ll survive?” asked Kyra.

“Survival rate projected ninety-one percent,” the machine affirmed.

She exhaled in relief. They were still so far from safe, and it might take Jao weeks to fully recover from that kind of injury, but at least she’d done something for him. She wasn’t useless after all.

“Good,” Horn said coldly. “Your work is done, droid. Return to your station.”

“Affirmative,” the droid chirped, then floated its way out of the chamber.

The Sith turned to follow but he lingered to look at Kyra for a moment. She was in no mood to thank him; luckily, he didn’t seem to expect it. His lips pressed tight, as though he was holding back words of his own. Then he turned and stepped outside. The door hissed shut and locked behind him.

Jao was still unconscious, and the droid had neglected to close his eyes. She walked across the room, turned around, and carefully shut his eyelids with the touch of both hands. Then she withdrew to her bench; there was nothing to do now but wait, and to think.

She was surprised her thoughts veered toward Eli Horn. Whatever evils he’d committed with the Sith it was clear he was tired and overwhelmed. In another situation she might have felt sympathy with him.

Not so now. *Mynock* would catch up with them, Kyra was certain of that. When it did, she hoped she and Jao and all their friends got out of the confrontation safely. Whatever had to happen to the Sith would happen. The people she cared about had to be protected. Nothing mattered more than that.

Despite having taken a pair of stun blasts, Lowbacca was the first one to stir, and Deliah awoke less than twenty minutes after. By that time they’d already moved Cade and Talon both inside *Mynock*. The former he let sprawl unconscious on the sofa in the crew lounge; as for the latter, he trussed her hands and feet, then sealed her in the airlock

vestibule. It never hurt to be too careful, and he had more important things to worry about than one Sith witch.

Once they were recovered, Lowbacca and Deliah joined Jariah and the droids in the lounge. They stood around the sofa, looking grimly at Cade's twitching form, as Jariah explained everything that had happened on the plain.

"I don't know what shape the Imp's in," he said, "I don't even know if he's alive. But Kyra, all she got hit by was a stun blast."

"So now she's locked up by a Sith," Deliah shook her head. "Do we know where they ran?"

"No, but I checked *Mynock's* sensors. They picked up a ship shooting into orbit about three hours ago. Came from about fifty kilometers away."

Lowbacca gave a series of roars, and C-3PO said, "It is possible that Master Horn hasn't yet left the system. He may be staying nearby to retrieve Darth Talon."

"Maybe. Or he's hightailed it off to the closest Sith hideaway, tail between his legs," said Deliah.

Or, Lowbacca suggested, he'd already uncovered the secret Khat Lah had come here for.

Jariah shook his head. "I don't know. I figure if they'd found what they were looking for, they'd've left Tython before we even got here. Besides, without the Force they're as deaf and dumb as we all are."

All of them except Cade, he thought grimly. Times like these he wished they'd never learned Cade was a Jedi at all. Then they'd still be flying free, him Cade and Deliah, not caring about the greater good of the karking galaxy. Then every planet would still be in Krayt's hands, and Cade would still be burning with repressed rage, and Rav would still have a hold over them both. Still, right now, it felt like a worthy trade.

"We're not gonna get answer standing around," Deliah said, voice icy cold. Jariah knew what was coming next. "Let's see if we can get straight answers from the prisoner."

Lowbacca grunted agreement and followed her to the airlock. The Wookiee shouldn't have been so eager; he'd never seen Deliah moved by rage, and it was a sight no righteous Jedi would approve of. The Zelton plucked a bag

of repair tools off a table as she moved out of the lounge and walked the rest of the way on long fast strides. When she opened the door to the airlock Talon was awake and on the floor, lithe body awkwardly contorted with both wrists and ankles clasped behind her back.

"How you doing, *schutta*?" Deliah asked cheerfully, then slung the tool bag off her shoulder and tossed it. The heavy thing crashed down inches from Talon's face. Metal smacked on metal and Deliah crouched to her haunches in front of the Twi'lek.

"I realize you're not big on talking," the Zeltron said, "But you're going to tell us what you were doing on Tython, where your boy-toy ran off to, and what the kark happened to my Cade. You got that?"

Talon's blue eyes didn't blink. Jariah stepped up behind Deliah and put hands on his hips. "Seriously, you'd best do some talking. Cade's still out of commission. Your apprentice flew off with two of our own. Maybe he's trying to figure out how to rescue you. Maybe he left you to die. I don't know. All I do know is that you're stuck here with us, *cheeka*, and without your *grancha* Force powers you won't last long against Blue's mean streak."

"You really won't," Deliah affirmed.

She reached into the toolbag and drew out a small, thin welding tool. With the flick of a switch, the tip became superheated and bright. Lowbacca growled uneasily but didn't intervene. If things went far enough he would, but right now he seemed willing to give Deliah a little leeway.

Deliah didn't move too fast. She dangled the hot device over Talon's cheek and said, "Getting all those tats must've hurt. I bet enduring the pain was some Sith rite of passage. Well, I can hurt you a lot more, and you won't have any Force to call on. So you'd best start telling us what you know before I get ahead of myself."

Face half-pressed into the floor, Talon said, "I can't tell you anything."

"Not good enough." Deliah inched the welding torch closer.

"Not won't, *can't*," Talon insisted, and fear tremored her voice. "I don't know what happened to Skywalker. The

pyramid was as inert for us as it was for you, and anyone else without the Force.”

Lowbacca roared a question, and Jariah translated, “How’d you get on Tython in the first place?”

Talon hesitated, but her gaze darted to the torch as she said, “We learned Khat Lah had come here from a xenoarchaeologist on Sebiris.”

Lowbacca roared again, and Deliah dipped the torch in close. “We were there when the Nagai dove in and tried to wreck the place. You called them down, didn’t you, to cover your tracks?”

Talon’s lips twisted and refused answer. Deliah drew the torch back, then dipped it down onto Talon’s exposed shoulder. It was there for less than a second, but long enough to burn red-dyed skin. Impressively, Talon did not cry out, though her bound body twisted and she bit her lower lip hard enough to draw blood.

Deliah seemed to enjoy that. “Plenty more where that came from, darling. A little burn’s the least you deserve. Your Nagai buddies killed thousands of people on Sebiris, and guess what? It was all for *nothing*. Cade figured out about Khat Lah and Tython anyway.” She shook her head. “All right, next question. What the hell *is* that thing? You must have some idea.”

“I don’t,” Talon insisted. “Tython was inhabited by Force-users over thirty *thousand* years ago. Long before the Jedi *or* the Sith. I have no idea what that pyramid is, and I have no idea what it did to Skywalker.”

She was probably right, but it wasn’t the answer Deliah wanted. The Zeltron played with the torch, considering whether to let it drop again. Jariah crouched beside her and told Talon, “Your apprentice has our friends. We know he took off as soon as he got back to your ship. Where’d he go?”

“I don’t know.”

“What, you don’t have a backup plan?”

“We were not expecting this encounter. Were you?”

She had him there. “I bet he’s calling for help. Where’s the nearest Sith outpost?”

“Nowhere near here.”

“Not an answer.” Deliah dipped the torch again, this time close to Talon’s face.

“The Sith don’t *care* about this,” she blurted. “Darth Nihl is focused on conquest. He’s pulled most of his Sith to the Outer Rim, or to spy on Coruscant. This mission.... This was just Eli and myself. To Nihl our mission is a fool’s errand. Unimportant.” Her eyes dropped to the floor, despondent. “*We* are unimportant.”

She sounded like a woman rejected by a lover; no, a parent. Jariah wasn’t in the sympathetic mood right now and neither was Deliah, but Lowbacca roared behind them, asking both to step outside. Just like a Jedi to put a breaker on things when they were making real progress. Jariah was reluctant, but he’d made a rule not to argue with Wookiees, and it wasn’t like Talon was going anywhere.

“Come on,” he tapped Deliah’s shoulder. “Let’s take a breather.”

The Zeltron nodded reluctantly and switched off the torch. She straightened, picked up her tool back, and followed Jariah and Lowbacca out into the hallway. They sealed the door behind them.

They were surprised to see C-3PO waiting in the hallway. The droid’s photoreceptors swung back and forth between them, as though he were worried about something, and when he didn’t start blabbing right away Jariah asked, “What is it, Threepio? Were you waiting outside the whole time?”

“Not the *whole* time, Master Jariah, only the past one minute and twenty-six seconds. I didn’t want to interrupt the interrogation process, no matter how critical the news.”

“News? What news?”

“It’s Master Cade, sir. He’s woken up.”

As soon as the words came out Deliah was sprinting down the hall. Jariah and Lowbacca followed, only a little bit slower, leaving the droid to shuffle after them. Back in the lounge, Cade was still on the sofa, but his eyes were open and looking up at the ceiling. R2-D2 tittered anxiously beside him.

“Oh, Cade, baby, talk to me, *meeshku*,” Deliah said. She dropped to her knees beside R2 and squeezed Cade’s hand tight.

He squeezed hers back, weakly, but he didn't stir and didn't look at her. His eyes were still boring into some other place, some other time.

"Perhaps I should have qualified my statement first," C-3PO said apologetically. "Master Cade has regained some awareness... But his mental state is still quite abnormal."

Jariah wanted to make some brash comment about how Cade had always been a little abnormal, but it was difficult when Deliah was squeezing his hand and begging for reply.

Finally, his jaw hinged open. Voice creaked out from his throat: "There's... so.... so much..."

As firmly as he could, Jariah asked, "What is it, *pateesa*? What's there a lot of?"

Cade's whole body trembled; a harsh rattling escaped his chest. Then his eyes fluttered, as though he was blinking away dreams. Deliah stroked his face with her free hand and said, "Are you with us, Cade? Tell us you're here. Please."

His eyes rolled sideways to focus on her. "True Blue," he whispered.

"That's right." She moved both hands to clasp his. "You scared the hell out of me, Cade. Don't do that again, please."

"Wasn't really... trying to."

"What happened to you?" asked Jariah. "All we saw was a door open in that monolith thing. It pulled you in, then spat you out a minute later." R2-D2 tweeted something, and Jariah patted his dome. "You've have gotten knocked up a little if Artoo hadn't caught your fall."

"Thanks, buddy," Cade told the droid. He didn't sit up or even try too; he looked on the verge of falling into another dream.

"Cade," said Deliah, "What *happened* to you?"

"You said... I was gone a minute."

"That's right."

"Felt like... a *lot* longer."

Lowbacca roared, repeating the question: What happened? Instead of responding Cade closed his eyes. He took deep, deliberate breaths so they knew he wasn't going to slip away again. When he opened eyes he said, "I know where Khat Lah went. I saw it. And I know where he's trying to get to."

Jariah frowned. "They're not the same?"

“Hypergate. He was trying to fix up a hypergate to get to... where he wanted to go. *Did* fix it. He fixed it up and got it working.”

“How do you know that?” Deliah’s brows drew together.

Instead of explaining Cade shook his head. “I can see the planet. With the hypergate. I saw the planet, and the ones close by, and the stars... I just don’t know *where* it is. What it’s called. Got to... look at the nav database. Look at star maps. Figure it out...” His eyes darted over the figures looming around him. “Wait... Where’s Kyra and the Imp?”

Grimly Deliah said, “Captured. And Jao got hurt bad.”

Cade finally tried to sit up, but he was still too weak and dropped back onto the sofa. “Captured... by who?”

“Sith,” Jariah said. “Specifically, that Horn kid. He grabbed them and took off in his ship. No idea where he went, or how far.” Almost as an aside he added, “We’ve got Talon trussed up on *Mynock*, so it came out kind of a draw.”

Cade’s eyes went distant again as he took all the information in. Then he said, “Help me up. Help me to the cockpit. I need to figure out where we need to be.”

Eli had set the ship to notify him whenever sensors picked up any other vessels moving in Tython’s orbit, but he was in the cockpit anyway when alarms went off and *Mynock* pushed out of the planet’s atmosphere. He quickly killed the alarm but did nothing to activate thrusters, shields, or weapons. He simply watched *Mynock* on sensors. The ship didn’t seem eager to escape the system. Instead it settled into a leisurely mid-orbital drift, between Ashla and Bogan but closer to the former.

For his part, Eli had kept his ship in Bogan’s lower orbit, locked to face the planet at all times but close enough to the moon to make his ship hard to spot, especially as he coasted along on minimal thrust.

He’d had hours to plan what he would do next and come up to no solution. If he was extremely lucky he might get a drop on *Mynock* as the ship neared Bogan, cripple it with a few well-placed blasts, then force it to surrender Talon and whatever knowledge they’d gleaned on Tython.

He certainly wasn't expecting that; even when the Force had been with him it hadn't been that generous. Nonetheless, he watched and waited as *Mynock* dipped close to Ashla to scout the satellite. It circled around it, slipping out of Eli's view, only to reappear less than ten minutes later. Then the freighter kicked power to engines and began an approach on Bogan. Clearly, Skywalker's crew thought the same way he did.

Knowing it would never work out as well as he'd hoped, but daring to hope anyway, Eli dipped his ship deeper toward Bogan's thin atmospheric envelope. Once he determined *Mynock's* approach vector he nudged the ship around the moon's ecliptic and out of direct sight-line. He input quick calculations based on *Mynock's* velocity and estimated what speed would be required for him to circle around the Bogan and come around behind Skywalker's ship. The increase in thrust might give him away, but it was the best shot at an ambush he had.

Eli kicked the shuttle ahead. He armed cannons and raised shields as he circled the moon. Tython swing out of view, replaced by dense-packed stars. His heart beat faster and harder, until he thought the tension would burst through his chest. Tython appeared again and Eli watched carefully for the bright blaze of *Mynock's* rear engine. He would get one shot at most, and he armed his missiles and prepared for a crippling blow.

He kept swinging around Bogan, but *Mynock* was nowhere to be seen. He took his eyes off the viewport and checked sensors. No ship behind him. No ship in view at all. Perhaps they'd circled Bogan at a fast speed, in which case they'd be on the opposite side of the moon by now. Eli increased speed and his heart beat even harder.

Then, suddenly, his sensors wailed. *Mynock* dove in from above, emerging from Bogan's atmospheric envelope near the moon's north pole. Laser blasts fired wide, but the volleys gained accuracy as *Mynock* drew closer. Eli froze at the critical moment, unsure whether to fight or flee.

Then his comm board lit up. Eli slapped it to open the channel, and a smug voice said, "Hey, we gonna play peek-a-boo all day or are you gonna come out and talk?"

So it would be neither fight nor flight. Eli angled his ship to face the approaching one. He kept forward shields to full and waited until he got a target lock on *Mynock* before replying, "I have both of your people. They're alive."

"We're gonna need verification on that, *pateesa*," the man on the other line said. He was pretty sure it was the one he'd fought on Tython, Jariah Syn.

"What about Darth Talon? If you're talking to my captives, I need to talk to yours."

"We've currently got her trussed in an airlock."

"I need to talk to her."

"Go get your prisoners, we'll get ours."

"All right, stand by."

As he rose from the cockpit seat Eli wondered if he'd made a tactical mistake. Of course Skywalker's people wouldn't harm Talon; they had a Jedi among them, and Lowbacca would never let the spacer trash kill or maim her. He should have asked instead about Skywalker's status; that was really what this conversation would hinge on.

Eli ignited his lightsaber before unlocking the door to the cell. When he stepped inside he found Kyra and Jao Assam as he'd left them: the young woman slumped awkwardly with hands bound behind her back, the Imperial Knight lying face-up and slowly mending on his bench. Eli was surprised to find him conscious; Assam rolled his head slightly to see the newcomer but didn't have the strength to sit upright.

To Kyra he said, "Come with me."

Still on the bench she said, "Why should I?"

"So you can talk to your companions."

She straightened in surprise, then got to her feet. Eli stepped back and let her pass out of the room, then shut the door behind her. The girl turned and looked at him, expectant, until he remembered she'd never seen anyplace else on the ship. With the jab of a lightsaber he directed her to the right, then marched her down the halls until they reached the cockpit.

After she sat awkwardly in the co-pilot's seat, Eli said, "Talk. The line is open."

Kyra looked around until she found the comm unit, then hunched forward and said, "This is Kyra. Who is this?"

"It's Jariah," the voice returned. Eli watched with interest as her hopeful expression wilted.

Frowning, Kyra pressed on. "Who else is with you? Is everyone all right?"

"We were gonna ask *you* that," said a new voice, female. Deliah Blue. "What happened to Jao? Is he still alive?"

"He is," Kyra exhaled. "The shipboard medic droid patched him up, but he's still in bad shape. He can't even stand right now. He needs a couple days in a bacta tank."

"Understood. We're glad you two are okay."

Eli, hovering over Kyra's back with the lightsaber deactivated but still in hand, said, "Let me speak to Darth Talon. Is she with you?"

He heard faint shuffling, then Talon's voice. "I am here, apprentice."

Eli felt a rush of relief; he was no longer completely alone. "Good. What happened to Skywalker? Is he still unconscious?"

There was a tense pause, as though the people on the other side were deciding what to say. Then a new voice came on. It was audibly tired and half-familiar. "Yeah. He woke up."

Eli realized he was talking to Skywalker himself. The man's smug bravado was gone. So was the usual taunting sneer. He asked, "What happened to you on Tython?"

There was another pause as Skywalker gathered his thoughts. Eli and Kyra leaned forward intently, mutual distrust dissolved by the need to know.

Then Skywalker said, "That monolith I fell into is called a Tho Yor. It's been on Tython a really, really long time. It's... an ark that brought the original Jedi to Tython in the first place."

"Brought Jedi from where?" asked Eli.

"They weren't Jedi yet," Skywalker clarified. "They wouldn't be... for a long time yet. That doesn't matter. The point is, Khat Lah found that Tho Yor. He dug it up with his Vong buddies and 'cause he had the Force he got to go inside. And see what I saw."

There was another pause as Skywalker decided what to say. This time everyone waited patiently until he started again. "The Tho Yor pointed Khat Lah to a hypergate. That's why

he went to Sebiris, because he needed parts to get the *other* one operational. Don't ask me why he didn't use the one on Sebiris. I guess it went to the wrong place or something."

"But where was he trying to get to, ultimately?" Eli interjected.

Skywalker ignored the question. "Khat Lah stole the pieces from Sebiris and put together a working hypergate. He's gone through. That's what the Tho Yor told me. This was all about a year ago. I guess he's still on the other side of the gate. I wasn't really clear on that part. Or a lot of parts."

Skywalker stopped. Eli waited this time until it seemed clear the man was done, but before he could get his question out Kyra did it instead. "Do you know where the working hypergate is? Did the Tho Yor show you?"

A sigh crackled over the comm, then silence. A Wookiee moan sounded next, and a prissy voice said, "Master Lowbacca suggests we attend to the matter at hand."

"Right," added Syn, "We got prisoners to exchange."

"Unacceptable," Darth Talon said. "Eli, do not give them the prisoners unless they give you the coordinates of the hypergate."

"But Master—"

"My mission was to find Khat Lah," she said, voice cracking. "If I can't accomplish that... then I may as well die."

The comm hummed silence. Voice not quite soft, Kyra said, "Nobody has to die today. Not unless they want to."

Eli took a breath and told *Mynock*, "I have my master's orders. Unless I get the coordinates, I won't give you the prisoners."

He waited, heart beating heavy in his chest. The line stayed open but he heard no sound for what seemed like an eternity. Then Syn said, "We've got the guns to disable your ship, *bukee*."

"If you do that, I'll kill the prisoners before you board. I promise that."

Kyra gave no reaction. Whatever kind of padawan she was, the young woman was brave.

More silence, until Skywalker sighed loudly. Eli could picture the man slumping in his chair.

"I can't give the coordinates because I don't have 'em," Skywalker groaned. "The karking vision *showed* me the planet and the star system but they didn't give me a map or rodding chart. You get it? We just spent hours going over *Mynock's* nav computer. We got the best star charts in the galaxy loaded in here, millions of systems, and we still can't find one that matches what I saw."

Eli's thoughts veered back to the Gree index that listed all the worlds the ancient empire had built hypergates on. He didn't know if that was an index of every such gate in the galaxy; the one Skywalker saw could have been built by the Kwa, Killiks, or some other ancient race and not included in the Gree index.

Yet, he realized, the only guide to finding Khat Lah's hypergate might be in his shuttle's databanks.

Eli's head swam; he might have stumbled on a victory, but he had to figure out how to use it. Trying for a casual tone he asked, "What kind of system did you see?"

There was another pause. Skywalker said, "What do you think I saw?"

He cursed himself for being transparent. "I have no idea what you saw. I just... wanted to know."

Talon said, "At Te Hasa, my apprentice retrieved a set of datacards from Darth Maladi's lab. These included translations of Gree archives, including an index of systems they'd built hypergates in. The translators were considerate enough to include coordinate listings on the standard galactic scale."

Eli couldn't believe his master confessed so much. Yet she'd cut through the distrust and deception that had dogged this entire conversation, right to the core of the matter.

"If I tell you what I saw," Skywalker said carefully, "You'll match it with your little Gree list and tell us where to find the hypergate. Is that what you're saying?"

"I won't know if I can until you tell me," Eli said. "But I will try."

Skywalker exhaled. "Listen, kid, I'm not gonna trust your love for your *cheeka* here. I gotta operate on the assumption you'll run out on us as soon as you figure out where the treasure is. I can't have that."

“Then what do you expect?”

Syn spoke next. “Let us place a tracker on your ship. You put one on ours if you want to. We follow each other to the end of the line, wherever that is.”

As Eli considered he glanced sideways at Kyra, still stoic. “I could always remove the homing device on the way there,” he reminded.

“So could we,” said Skywalker. “Unfortunately, right now trust’s an essential for both of us.”

Eli doubted they’d remove their homing beacon; that would leave Kyra and Assam’s life forfeit. If he removed theirs, Talon’s freedom was equally ended. The Jedi was right; some grudging trust was the only way forward.

“Agreed,” Eli said. “Maneuver your ship close to mine.”

“Will do,” said Syn.

“And if you try to board, or do anything-”

“You’ll kill the prisoners. We get it. Very Sith,” sighed Skywalker. “Just get ready, kid.”

The man was getting his energy back, as well as his sneer. Eli killed the comm line and turned to Kyra. “On your feet. Back to your cell.”

She rose, but regarded him before marching out of the cockpit. She said, “You used to be a Jedi apprentice. Why did you join the Sith?”

There were many answers to that question, and he’d recited them all to himself at intervals. Looking at Kyra he decided to give a more honest one. “The Jedi taught us we used the Force to serve the galaxy. I saw how the galaxy ‘helped’ the Jedi. The Sith showed me a better way, a stronger way.”

This wasn’t the time to explain all that had pushed him to his current path, but Kyra seemed to accept that, and she let him march her back to the cell, where he locked her inside with Assam.

After that Eli hurriedly put on his vac suit, retrieved a homing beacon from the equipment locker, and went to the airlock. After he depressurized the vestibule he opened the door to black space beyond. He always hated going extravehicular; the blackness of space seemed to yawn like a consuming maw in all directions. Here in the Deep Core it was different for all the tight-packed stars and luminous

astral debris. The shuttle's hull was a small flat plan with an infinity of gleaming jewels sprawled out every direction. As Eli stood on the shuttle exterior, boots magnetically clamped to the hull, he watched *Mynock's* red spread-wing loom closer and closer until it occluded half the jeweled sky.

Mynock's airlock portal opened and a figure in a brown, rugged vac suit appeared. Eli couldn't see the face through its visor, nor did he have the comm code to talk to its occupant. That didn't matter. He took the homing device in both hands and carefully pushed it upward. He let it fly through the vacuum until it collided with the underside of *Mynock's* port engine casing and stayed there, magnetically locked. Meanwhile, the figure in the brown suit threw out a homing device that attached to the shuttle's dorsal S-foil.

Eli edged back to the airlock. The other figure retreated to the portal from which it had come. The two figures stared at each other across the void, each half-expecting the other to run out and remove the tracking device attached to his ship. In the end the one from *Mynock* ducked inside first and sealed the airlock. Eli did the same immediately thereafter; he had no intention of removing that homing device, especially not here.

There were other ways he could yet turn things to his advantage. As soon as Eli was underway to whatever system Skywalker had discovered, he could patch in a call to Darth Nihil. The Dark Lord would hopefully be forgiving of his and Talon's mistakes now that they'd finally obtained results, and Eli would convince him to send a few Nagai warships to meet Skywalker at their final destination. Possibly Skywalker was planning a similar double-cross, but Eli doubted it. He valued the lives of his companions too much to risk getting them killed.

Removing only the helmet of his vac suit, Eli hurried back to the cockpit. He dropped into the pilot's chair and watched as *Mynock* drifted away, reverting to its original position. He tapped on the comm and said, "All right. We're tacking each other now. Will you please describe the system we need to find?"

"Sure thing, kid," Skywalker responded immediately. Likely either Jariah Syn or Deliah Blue else had gone out in

the vac suit, then. "You got something to write this all down?"

He was being snide again. The man knew how to rattle like none other. Eli tapped his computer console and brought up the translated Gree index. "I'm ready when you are," he said.

"Glad to hear it," Skywalker said, then told him all he needed to know.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Marin had travelled a lot of the galaxy, and on a few occasions she'd made stops at Bakura. Located where the Outer Rim met the Unknown Regions, it was far from any major trade routes but nonetheless industrialized and productive, with a lucrative corner on the repulsorlift market. She hadn't been to the world in decades but she remembered it fondly for its lush nature and cities that felt big and busy without being overwhelming.

She was therefore unprepared when they descended into its atmosphere and banked over the smoldering ruins of Salis D'aar. The metropolis of her memory had been reduced to stretching miles of black debris, and the destruction was so wholesale that it could only have been delivered via orbital bombardment.

Nihl's conquerors had never done this kind of damage to an occupied world before, as it would only make potential targets fight harder. Something had made the Sith change his mind.

As they flew over the wreckage she noticed that select portions of the city had been spared destruction. That included the government district, where stately pyramids and broad green lawns rested in surreal contrast to the surrounding devastation. Her stomach twisted even more when she realized the bombardment must have happened after the planet's conquest, not before.

It was the brutality of the Sith unleashed, more proof than ever that they didn't need the dark side to wreak untold death and agony. She looked around at the others inside the cockpit

of Yaga Auchs' shuttle. Ania and Liem's faces were twisted in horror, and though Yaga and Sora Auchs had their helmets on and faces covered, they emanated revulsion in the Force.

"We have to stop him here," Ania whispered.

"That's still the plan," said Sora. Seated at the controls, she guided the shuttle onto what looked like a small private landing pad jutting out from the base of a large pyramid.

Marin looked at Auchs. "Any idea where exactly we're being taken?"

"None."

"Great," muttered Ania.

Sora lowered the shuttle onto the pad. There was a small greeting party gathered to meet them, and while Marin had been expecting Nagai or even other Sith, it seemed to consist of six red-scaled saurians. They looked to be well over two meters tall and more than twice the size of a human, even a big man like Auchs. She'd never seen Ssi-ruuk before, only P'w'eck on her long-ago visits to Bakura. There was something more fierce about them than their former servant race. She was sure they'd be harder to kill and hoped they wouldn't have to fight them when the time came.

The ship was secure on the ground, but none of them moved to exit. They all knew that once they stepped outside the shuttle there was a strong chance they wouldn't come back. After some debate with Auchs, they'd agreed that a total of four armored Mandalorians would be realistic escort for one high-price prisoner. Any more might raise Nihl's suspicions, and any less might not be enough to handle the Sith Lord. Auchs seemed to only trust his daughter; Marin had already promised to go with Ania and Liem had volunteered his services. The young man was brave and a good fighter, and unlike Hondo Karr or Tes Vevec, she trusted her nephew not to shoot the *Mand'alor* in the back. She prayed he got through this.

"*Sor'ika*, are we transmitting to the frigate?" asked Auchs. His personal warship was sitting in orbit, lonely amongst the massive, ovoid Ssi-ruuvi cruisers.

"Yes, *buir*. And they've still got a link with Stazi."

"Did they send him our data?" asked Marin.

"He knows everything they've got in orbit."

“Good. Hope the admiral’s timely,” grunted Auchs. “Once we get Nihl alone, we go at him right away.”

“What if those lizards down there don’t leave us alone?” asked Liem.

“Then we fight them too. We’re all armed.” He turned his visored face to Marin. “The few times I’ve met Nihl, he’s had his lightsaber with him. It’s a long-handled thing, not like a typical saber, but I imagine it cuts all the same.”

Marin hadn’t wielded any lightsaber since she’d given up her own forty years ago. She didn’t even know if she could wield the thing safely, but she knew it was better in her hands than Nihl’s. “I’ll get it away from him. Then you can attack.”

Auchs nodded. Silence filled the cockpit. Softly, Ania said, “Is that it? Do we have a plan?”

“We do,” said Auchs. “Let’s get some stun cuffs on your wrists. We’ll lock them for authenticity. When the fighting starts, duck low.”

“That was the plan,” Ania said, though she was looking at her mother.

Marin had been consistently surprised by Ania’s devotion and bravery. She had to make sure her daughter survived. Memory tugged on her, reminding her of people she’d loved and failed to save even as a Jedi. This time would be different, she told herself. This time, at long last, she would do it right, or die trying.

When the hail came from Yaga Auchs explaining the prize he’d captured, Nihl had been surprised and skeptical. The Mandalore had explained that his men had gotten into a scrape with the famous fringer Ania Solo while pacifying Bepin’s Cloud City, a notorious gathering-point for lowlifes and scoundrels. They’d recognized her, captured her, and were bringing the prize present to Bakura for Nihl’s personal satisfaction. The story sounded plausible in itself, though it rankled to think that a band of Mandalorian thugs could succeed where the Sith had so disastrously failed.

Still, Nihl was on edge. Auchs’ sudden arrival was unusual, but more it was the Solo woman. They said she was blind to the Force and always had been, but in her tangling with the

One Sith and the rogue Darth Wredd she'd betrayed an uncanny luck. Even now the Force might be working through her in subtle, dangerous ways.

He'd chosen to meet the prisoner in President Recado's office. Since watching the blazing destruction of Salis D'aar through these windows he'd become fond of the room. Even now it looked out on a compelling contrast of stately white buildings and blackened wreckage. From this angle, deep within the undamaged government district, it seemed like a bleak and perfect balance.

A buzzer announced the arrival of the prisoner. Nihl tapped a button on the president's desk and the door opened. A unique procession entered: first a red-scaled Ssi-ruu warrior, followed by two Mandalorians in gray and red, then a prisoner with hands shackled. Behind her were two more Mandalorians, including the green-armored figure he knew to be Yaga Auchs. Finally, one more Ssi-ruu stepped into the office, leaving four more in the hallway outside.

Stepping ahead of the others, Auchs said, "We've got the prisoner for you."

Two Mandalorians stepped aside so Nihl could look down on Ania Solo. She was outwardly unremarkable, shorter than average for a human, with a plain round face and messy hair. Her posture was a defeated slump and she didn't strain the stun cuffs attached to her wrists.

Nihl grabbed her chin and tilted her head toward his. A little angry defiance sparked in her eyes, and he knew this was the woman who'd done the One Sith so much harm.

"You are impressive, Mandalore," he told Auchs. "I'll make sure you're paid a handsome bonus for this."

"I'd like to talk about just how handsome."

"Of course you would." Just like a vermin mercenary to take the glow off every triumph. "One hundred thousand credits."

"For this *dal'ika* I want more. Three hundred."

Nihl snorted. "You're getting too brazen, Auchs. That's more than we paid you to kill your own Mandalore."

Auchs froze for a second, probably surprised to be reminded of his crime in front of an audience. Nihl had

intended exactly that; the vermin needed to be kept in his place.

Finally Auchs said, "I needed Ordo out of the way so I could be in charge. That was part of my reward. I couldn't care if this Solo woman lives or dies."

"Then you should take one hundred thousand and be happy."

"I'm giving her to you because I know you want her. I could have just let her go. This is a sign of friendship."

"An expensive one. All right, two hundred and fifty thousand."

"Done." He could hear Auchs' smile.

"You'll get your money shortly." Nihl tugged the Solo woman forward by the chin. She squirmed but didn't cry out. "Thank you for the prize, Mandalore. Your services are appreciated, as always. You can go now."

Auchs didn't move. Neither did the Mandalorians. Nihl raised a brow. "Well? Is there something else to discuss?"

A heartbeat passed. Auchs said, "Just one other thing."

"And what is that?"

As he spoke, Nihl felt a sudden tug at his waist, on the opposite side of his body as the Solo woman. He looked down and saw this long-bodied lightsaber jerking forward, as though grabbed by an invisible hand and straining at the latch connecting it to his belt.

That was impossible. He slapped his free hand down and the weapon ceased to tremble. He looked up at the two Ssi-ruuk and four Mandalorians, all staring at him blankly, and he wondered if he'd somehow imagined it.

Then the control panel to the office door burst in a flash of sparks. An invisible punch threw him off his feet, away from the Solo woman and onto the back of the president's desk. Nihl skidded off it, rolled, landed on both feet and ignited his lightsaber just in time to catch the first volley of laser blasts.

They'd surprised him, but he wasn't beaten yet.

They should have known it wouldn't go to plan. The damned Ssi-ruuk just wouldn't go away and Nihl had no inclination to dismiss them, but they'd come here expressly for this and couldn't walk away.

Marin Skirata must have used the Force to blow the door controls and seal them inside. It would buy them some time, maybe enough. If only they could have gotten Nihl's lightsaber away.

There was no time for regrets. When everything burst to action, Sora and Liem pivoted to fire on the Ssi-ruuk guards while Yaga and Marin opened on Nihl. The Sith rolled off the desk, landed nimbly on his feet, and batted away their first volleys with his saber expertly, like he still had the Force. Then he reared back on one leg and slammed the other boot into the desk, tipping it over and giving himself a little bit more cover.

At the same time, Sora and Liem pumped barrages of laserfire into the closest Ssi-ruu. By taking it together their blasts managed to punch through its thick scarlet scales, and the alien released an awful pained wail as it collapsed on the floor. The second, however, got off a burst from its paddle-beamer weapon that caught Sora square in the chest. The energy discharge flashed against her *beskar* and its kinetic energy picked her off her feet and threw her into the opposite wall.

Against himself, Yaga panicked. He spun from Nihl, called his daughter's name, and raised his blaster to fire on the Ssi-ruu. The alien turned on him with impressive speed and fired another shot from the strange weapon. Yaga knew a moment of sizzling pain as he was thrown off his feet and sent skidding across the carpet. Those weapons were designed to stun, he knew, and his *beskar* must have deflected some of the energy, but not all.

He was stuck on the ground, unable to rise as tingling shot through his limbs and made them shake uncontrollably. His vision swam and he barely registered it when Liem pumped several shots into the back of the Ssi-ruu's head and felled the saurian. When it cleared Yaga saw his blaster had fallen from his hands and lay a half-meter out of reach.

He also saw that Nihl had grabbed hold of Ania Solo. The Sith had wrenched the woman, still in stun-cuffs, to her feet and pinned her body against his. He was still a full head taller than her but he used her to shield all his torso. His red lightsaber blazed beneath her jaw, centimeters from her neck.

Nihl wasn't paying any attention to Yaga, who lay strewn and helpless to the side. The Sith was using his hostage to edge closer to the door, which the Ssi-ruuk were pounding on as they tried to gain entry. Marin and Liem, the only two left standing, had their weapons trained but hesitated to shoot. Nihl could cut into Ania's neck with just the tiniest movement, and Marin seemed unwilling to risk using the Force.

Yaga forced himself onto one elbow. Nihl didn't notice. He remembered his second blaster, the hold-out still stored in the compartment beneath this right wrist. Keeping his hand on the floor, hidden from Nihl's view, Yaga ejected it into his hand.

He had his shot, a headshot from the flank. The only issue was Ania. He whispered into his helmet's comlink, just loud enough for the others to hear: "Grab the saber. Now."

Still propped on his left elbow, he snapped his right arm up and squeezed his trigger. A shot flashed just over Ania's head, singing black hair a millisecond before it vanished into Darth Nihl's temple. A millisecond later the laser burst out the other side of his skull and impacted on the opposite wall.

Nihl's body wavered on its feet. With her invisible Force grip, Marin wrenched the lightsaber from his limp hand and tossed it inert to the floor.

Face frozen in slack surprise, the Sith toppled to one side and Ania half-fell the other way. Her mother was there to grab her in both arms. Yaga pushed himself a fully upright and saw his own daughter struggling to her feet. On the floor, two red Ssi-ruuk and one black-and-white Nagai lay still, never to rise again.

Still dazed from the paddle-beamer, Yaga felt a moment of lightheaded triumph. Then he reminded himself the job was just starting. Marin separated herself from her daughter, walked over to Yaga, and extended an open hand.

"Thank you," she said.

Yaga stared at the hand, the red-armored figure bending low in supplication instead of threat. After a moment of instinctive fear he reached out, took it, and let Marin help him to his feet. Once upright, he wavered on unsteady legs. The Ssi-ruuk outside were still pounding on the door, and

they'd break through sooner instead of later. Maybe a distraction would slow them down.

Liem asked, "Can you send the message to your ship?"

"I've got it." He changed the freq on his helmet's transmitter and mouthed a simple message: "Stage One accomplished. Proceed to Stage Two. *Mand'alor*, out."

Five minutes and twenty seconds after jumping to lightspeed from the staging area outside the Bakura System, *Alliance* dropped from hyperspace into the planet's gravity well. The command deck shuddered and Gar Stazi braced himself against the back of the tactical lieutenant's chair as the verdant planet exploded into view. He looked at the display holo, which had already been calibrated to show the Ssi-ruuvi cruisers in orbit as relayed by Yaga Auch's ship and felt a small glow of triumph when *Alliance's* sensors confirmed the information as accurate.

The display holo grew brighter with added lights marking the Alliance and Imperial warships that had just entered Bakura's orbit. They'd decanted at positions informed by Auch's data and half of them were immediately placed within firing range of the nearest Ssi-ruuvi warships. The large ovoid cruisers pivoted to bring their forward weapons to bear but struggled under the surprise attacks.

It was a good start, but there was more at stake than just Bakura. Stazi turned to Jhoram Bey, whom he'd tasked with coordinating actions in the Javin sector and beyond. The real test of this plan's success would come in minutes.

"Slossar and Jaeger have engaged the enemy," Bey told him. "They're currently broadcasting Auch's signal to the Mandalorian ships."

"In all combat zones?"

"That's right. Jaeger's staging a counterattack on Javin itself. Slossar is at Lutrillia. They report Mando ships spread out at both locations, alongside the Nagai and Ssi-ruuk."

"Taking part in combat?"

"Yes, sir. As hostiles." Bey swallowed. "Their turnaround wouldn't look convincing otherwise, would it?"

It certainly would not. Back at Botajef all those years ago, the Mandalorians had suddenly switched sides because of

their leader's murder. Now the murderer was orchestrating a precise, deliberate act of backstabbing that reversed his previous one. Auchs had called it poetic; to Stazi it was a more unpleasant kind of irony, but if it worked, he wouldn't complain.

As Bey monitored reports from the Javin sector, Stazi looked back at Bakura. Space around the planet was lighting up with joined battles, and unlike Geonosis, *Alliance* wasn't holding itself back from the fray. The destroyer's broad gray wedge was angled at an ovoid Ssi-ruuvi cruiser that had turned its forward guns to face them. From *Alliance*'s bridge it looked like an angry insectoid face spitting bright-red venom.

The droid starfighters were coming out in force, and this time Stazi had ordered his ships to emulate the tactics of Captain Bovark and the other Imperials. Instead of trying to draw the droids away with Crossfires, the capital ships all raised shields to full and allowed the battle droids to unleash punishing attacks. As *Alliance* opened fire on the Ssi-ruuvi cruiser its batteries washed across the battle droid swarms, annihilating many. Other droids began throwing themselves like missiles into the destroyer's shields. For now, defenses held.

"New report from Lutrillia," Bey said. "Slossar reports the Mandos are switching sides."

Alliance shook under the Ssi-ruuvi assault, but Stazi felt relief flood his body. Against all expectation, Auchs was a man of his word. "Give me details, Jhoram. How are the Ssi-ruuk and Nagai reacting?"

"Undetermined. The Mandos took them by surprise and seem to be targeting Nagai ships especially, but they haven't withdrawn yet."

"What about Javin? Anything from Jaeger?"

Bey shook his head. "I'll try to contact them directly."

While the Weequay worked, Stazi turned attention back to the immediate fight. *Alliance* was trembling with repeated barrages and the forward shields had turned bright with energy scatter. He looked at the tactical holo and saw two Mon Cal cruisers approaching the Ssi-ruuvi ship from its flank. They'd bring necessary relief.

As he watched, Captain Antilles approached. "Admiral, we've worn away at least thirty percent of their droid starfighters. I was planning to launch our Crossfires."

Rogue Squadron and the other units had been sitting tight in the hangar, waiting to deploy. "I'll leave it to you, Captain."

"Thank you, sir. You should also know we've been scanning Bakura's surface. The results are... unsettling."

"In what way?"

"The major cities were all subjected to heavy orbital bombardment before we arrived. We can't even guess at the casualties."

That was a grim surprise; these conquerors had generally been lenient toward their newly-seized worlds. "Do we have any new contact with Auch's?"

"We received a brief message a few minutes ago. He reports his team has taken refuge in the president's building in the capital. They're requesting backup as soon as we can send it."

"Did they confirm Darth Nihl is dead?"

"They did, sir." Antilles almost cracked a smile.

Stazi openly grinned. "Excellent. Press closer to the planet and look for openings to begin sending down troops."

"We don't know how many Ssi-ruuk are on the surface."

"It doesn't matter. They'll have to be forced out if they don't surrender." An obvious idea occurred. "Begin broadcasting on open channels. Tell everything- I mean *everyone*- that Relik K'sharn is dead. Also tell them the Mandalorians have switches sides. Fix up a translation to Ssi-ruuvi as soon as you can."

"Right away, sir."

Stazi turned back to the tactical station. The holo showed the Ssi-ruuvi cruiser sustaining withering attacks on its right flank while *Alliance* pulled ahead to attack its left. Squeezed on either side, the ship wouldn't last long. Elsewhere, Captain Bovark's Imperials had taken out another Ssi-ruuvi ship, and another was ringed on all sides by Alliance vessels. Federation ships were still taking heavy losses, mostly to those droid fighters; the Geonosian Council of Hives had only been of limited help in devising counterattacks.

Nonetheless, the battle had clearly turned in their favor. He only hoped news of Nihl's death and the Mandalorians' treason would break the Ssi-ruuk's spirit and send them retreating. He didn't take it for granted; these saurians were a fanatic people, and Bakura in particular had long been an object of their desire. There could still be a long bloody fight to secure this planet, or what was left of it.

"Admiral," Bey called, "News from Javin. The Imperials confirm the Mandos have switched sides. Several Ssi-ruuvi cruisers have been damaged and the Nagai flagship is destroyed."

"Excellent news. We've just gotten confirmation Darth Nihl is dead."

"Even better," Bey grinned. "Auchs came through?"

"It seems he did. It seems like we've got what we've paid for. Captain Antilles is putting together a broadcast in Ssi-ruuvi announcing the Mandos' actions and Nihl's death. Once she's done, you should transmit it to all our allies and have *them* share the news with our foes."

"Do you think that will get them to withdraw?"

"It may give them the nudge we need."

As *Alliance* pushed past the burning Ssi-ruuvi cruiser, it began deploying Crossfires and landing ships. There were still battle droids that continued to harass, but the Alliance forces were able to push into the atmosphere. They were soon joined by a group of Imperial vectoring toward the capital. Stazi saw with satisfaction that the remaining Ssi-ruuvi cruisers were withdrawing from direct battle, but none had yet pulled out of Bakura's orbit.

"Perhaps our broadcast is working," he suggested to Antilles.

"We can only hope, sir."

A tactical officer reported, "Sirs, we're picking up ships lifting off from Salis D'aar. Look to be Ssi-ruuvi."

"A withdrawal?" asked Antilles.

"Perhaps," Stazi said. "Tell our landing parties not to fire on those ships unless fired upon. If the Ssi-ruuk want to retreat, we'll let them."

They waited, watching the tactical holo until it became clear the Ssi-ruuvi ships from the ground were running

straight to the cruisers in orbit. It was a withdrawal all right; when the first reports came from the landing parties they said they were receiving no resistance. The enemy had evacuated in hurry.

Stazi was relieved to have avoided a grueling fight, but his enthusiasm was cut short when the Ssi-ruuvi cruisers began firing from orbit. Short, concentrated blasts of laserfire lanced down and impacted on the surface. They'd ceased firing before the Federation ships could react, and as one they turned toward the stars and surged away from Bakura.

"Get with our ground teams," Stazi grimaced. "Find out what the hell that was."

"We're picking up precise hits at fixed locations," said the tactical lieutenant. "They look like industrial zones."

Another officer suggested, "It could be their repulsorlift factories."

Denying the conqueror his spoils was a long-time tactic of the loser. Stazi wondered why the Bakurans hadn't destroyed the factories themselves before surrendering. Perhaps they'd been hoping for mercy or believed a quick Federation response would drive the Ssi-ruuk away with their world still intact.

No matter what, they'd been bitterly disappointed.

Antilles said, "We're getting a better look at the ground situation now, sir."

"All right," Stazi said. "Let's see it."

He followed the captain to another station, where a two-dimensional image showed a banking view over a Bakuran city.

"This is from Rogue Leader's cam, sir," Antilles explained. "She's over Salis D'aar now."

Stazi leaned close to watch as Dahl's Crossfire veered close to a pile of black debris, flame, and smoke. It was difficult to tell the scale, but it seemed to have been a massive factory. The starfighter changed heading and dropped altitude, giving a view of the city itself. Block after block had been scorched clean by orbital bombardment. Devastation stretched toward the horizon, interrupted only rarely by patches of intact cityscape.

It was a terrible sight but Stazi forced himself to keep watching, even after it was announced that the Ssi-ruuk had exited the system. He needed this sobering reminder of victory's cost.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

It seemed like an onslaught of good news from the Outer Rim: Darth Nihl killed, Bakura and other key worlds liberated, the Nagai and Ssi-ruuk in retreat after a mid-battle turnaround by the Mandalorians savaged their fleets. On Coruscant, senators from the Imperial and Alliance blocs both praised the decisive conclusion of the conflict. Never mind that the fighting wasn't over, nor that things had only turned after weeks of muddy response hobbled by political chaos. Beings were electing to take this victory as a sign of more good things to come.

Marasiah didn't want to dash the good mood, but she couldn't share in it either. Everything about Eshkar Niin's capture and death disturbed her. Her uncle's actions appalled her and they'd barely spoken since, but the accusations Niin had raised before his killing couldn't be ignored. Hogrum had wanted to act right away and arrest not only Senator Derrol but Stazi himself. She'd denied him that and said she'd look into it further before taking action. That was why she'd invited Azlyn Rae to her office. The young woman stood in front of her empress' desk in her red armor. For a long time it had seemed like she'd exchange them for her old Jedi robes or new garb entirely; strange it was Azlyn's loyalty she could now rely on most.

"Be very careful when speaking to Derrol," she said. "Don't bring up his meeting with Stazi right away. Prod him about his relationship with Niin but don't volunteer information. Don't even tell him Niin was a Sith."

"I understand," said Azlyn. "Empress, given how Derrol acted *against* Eshkar Niin, should we come ready for violence?"

"I don't think he'll do anything rash if you speak to him in his office. Make sure you have at least two of my guards escort you."

"I'd like to bring Master Krieg along too."

Marasiah felt a flush of shame for not visiting Ganner in the medical center. He'd always been a loyal Knight, and her husband's best friend. "Has he recovered from his injury?"

"Enough to walk with minor assistance. Frankly, Empress, he's ready to get out of that bed."

"Then you can take him. Don't announce your visit beforehand. Go to the senate building and request to see Derrol on my authority. How he reacts will be telling."

Azlyn looked out the window. Afternoon sun was tinting gold and shadows were falling from skyscrapers. "Should we talk to him today?"

"Yes. Leave as soon as Ganner can get ready."

"I understand. Is there anything else?"

Marasiah hadn't told her that Havok was dead, nor how he'd died. It was a conversation she'd have to have, but she had no desire to start it now. "That's enough. Thank you, Master Rae."

"You're welcome, Empress."

Azlyn gave a short bow, then turned to leave the room. As she stepped through the door she nearly ran into Hogrum, who looked down on her with his red mechanical eye as she skirted around. When she was gone, Marasiah's uncle strode into the office and asked, "What was Master Rae here for?"

"A minor matter," Marasiah said guardedly. "What is it?"

"I have agents standing by to monitor Senator Derrol's apartment. I request your permission to arrest him this evening and take him in for questioning."

"Will you 'question' him like you did Niin?"

"It was necessary to use extreme methods to extract information from him."

"Don't lie to me, Uncle," she glowered. "You enjoyed torturing him. You wanted revenge. I wanted it myself. At least do the decency of not lying to me."

"I don't regret anything I did there," Hogrum said stiffly. "I forced Niin to confess the full scale of his actions. The operatives we've scooped up confirms what he's been telling us."

"Not that he met Derrol before Bavinyar."

"There are gaps," he admitted, "But we have proof Derrol and Stazi were conspiring about *something*. Sia, you *must* let me investigate this with every tool available."

It pained her to realize she no longer trusted her uncle. Their bond had been strained for some time, but his killing of Niin, justified or not, had broken something that might never be repaired. "I will handle this in my own way," she said. "In the meantime, I suggest you focus on external threats. You have some of Niin's agents. Interrogate them- *without* torture- and find more links to the Sith. Nihl is dead, and from what we can tell, many others were killed when the Mandalorians switched sides."

"We thought the Sith were defeated after the Floating World," Hogrum said.

"Exactly. If there are any left, Uncle, I want you to find them. I also want you to work with the admirals and get all the information you can on the Nagai and Ssi-ruuk. They looked like they're falling back to their home sectors but we have to be sure. Do you have objections to any of that?"

"I'll gladly do what you ask, but I cannot ignore Niin's accusations. Sia, you're letting Antares' killers go free. You say you're preserving peace but what we have now is a *false* peace, one erected by liars and killers."

Marasiah took a deep breath and quelled her anger. She reached out with the Force to sense his feelings. "Do you trust me, Uncle?"

He stared down at her, expression blank. "I've always trusted you."

She couldn't tell if he meant it. Like Niin, he'd been trained to wall off his feelings from the Force. "Will you do as I've ordered?"

"I will, Empress."

"Then do it."

Their eyes held for a tense moment. Then he turned and walked out of the room. When he was gone she felt her

energy drain. If Antares were here, she thought, he'd have offered some brash conviction that would have shown her what she needed to do. But he was gone, and she was alone.

Marasiah looked at the skyline and remembered the victories in the Outer Rim, the routed Sith. Maybe the optimists were right and things might finally turn around. She tried to believe, but when she thought of Eshkar Niin, her mother's friend and betrayer, slumped in his interrogation chair with a lightsaber slash through the face, there was no comfort to be had.

Locked inside his comfortable prison, Shado Vao barely noticed the liberation of Bakura. The space battle took place high above and unseen. Through his window he noted the lift-off of several Ssi-ruuvi shuttles without interest. The bombardment of the repulsorlift factory roused him to his window, but he could only see smoke rising in the far distance. He was vaguely aware that it came from the direction of the factory, but he didn't make the mental connection; he'd just assumed Darth Nihl had fallen into another wrathful mood.

Even after a pair of humans in olive-green Imperial uniforms opened his door and explained all that had happened, he found it hard to care. Even word of Nihl's death gave no satisfaction. He hated the Sith but even more he hated what he'd done, and there was no way to undo it or heal the damage now writ plain across Bakura's face.

The Imperials explained that Ambassador Storr had been found and released as well, and both of them would be taken to a star destroyer in orbit. From there, they'd be fully debriefed.

Shado wondered what Storr would say about him. He wondered if he would face any punishment for his actions here. He'd done nothing illegal but he felt, nonetheless, that something should be done to him. It was unfair that Bakura should suffer so much while he escaped without a scratch on his body.

As the Imperials started to escort him, Shado remembered something. He asked, "What happened to President Recado?"

They looked at each other, slightly confused, as though they didn't remember the name. Then one said, "We believe he was released also."

That was tiny relief, the first Shado had felt since Bakura fell. "Where is he now?" The Imperials hesitated. "Please, I'd like to know."

The older officer stepped aside and brought out his comlink. Shado waited patiently until the man turned back to him. "The president has returned to his office."

"May I see him? He's just a few levels above us." Again the Imperial hesitated. He added, "I won't take long. You have my word."

"All right," the older officer conceded, then added out of nothing, "My father said I should always trust a Jedi's word."

The words, meant in kindness, were a knife to Shado's heart. It was fresh pain to mix with the dulled kind he'd been swimming in since the bombardments began. When he reached Recado's office he was surprised by its state. Blaster-marks scorched a few walls, the desk had been overturned, and something, possibly blood, stained patches of the carpet.

The president sat in a chair behind his toppled desk. He was looking down at it as though he was expecting the thing to pull itself upright. He only raised his bald head when Shado stepped right beside him.

The old man blinked. "Master Jedi. I thought you'd be gone now."

"They're about to take me up to a star destroyer." He didn't need to add that he'd never return to Bakura and they'd never see each other again. He wanted to express so much more, but his thoughts were so tangled he couldn't put them to order. Pathetically he said, "I'm sorry. For everything." For his vanity and idealism, if there was any difference between the two.

Recado pivoted his chair to face the window. From this view, the city seemed almost perfectly split between preserved and bombed-out portions. Shado knew the real devastation spread far wider.

"It seems most of the P'w'eck left with the Ssi-ruuk," the president said softly. "Back to their old masters. What we'll do with the others... I don't know." He opened one hand to show the Balance crest in his palm, an oval split between black and white. "I hear the Ssi-ruuk are in retreat. The Nagai too. The rest of the galaxy is celebrating. Perhaps we're paying for their joy. Do you think that, Master Jedi?"

"I don't know," Shado said. He didn't understand anything anymore. He was wondering if he ever had.

Recado waved a hand at the carpet-stains and said, "Nihl was killed right here, did you know that?"

"I didn't."

"His own mercenaries betrayed him. They say it was a shot to the head." His hand closed around the Balance symbol. "I wish I could have seen it."

As much as he'd hated Nihl when the Sith called down the bombardment, Shado didn't regret missing his death. As he looked at the room's damage he felt, strangely, a tug of empathy for his enemy. Shado had tried to continue acting like a Jedi even without the Force to guide him, but it had let to ruin. In his own way Nihl had followed the same path. Maybe, if they'd had the Force, they'd have avoided their catastrophic errors. Maybe it would have made their mistakes even more disastrous.

"Rebuilding will be difficult," Recado said, half to himself. "Our people, our industry..."

"How many died?"

"Millions. It will be a long time before we know exactly."

"I'm so sorry," Shado whispered. Words could never convey the enormity of his regret.

Recado sighed and looked back to closed hands. "With all respect, Master Jedi... I wish you'd never come to Bakura."

So did Shado. It was just one action of many he could never undo and never rectify. Without another word, he turned from the old man and joined the Imperial escorts. They seemed eager to be gone.

The sun shone incongruously bright on Salis D'aar's ruined cityscape. It glared white on black husks of buildings, landspeeders flash-melted into durasteel balls by superheated

explosions, boulevards buried beneath layers of ash. The bombardment had been days ago but everything still smelled of burning and death. Marin knew this scene would forever overwrite her old memories of Bakura, and it stole satisfaction from a mission accomplished.

Free Agent, with Ania's friends at the helm, had set down beside Yaga Auch's ship near the president's pyramid. The rugged freighter and the company Mando assault shuttle looked incongruous together, which fit the strange feeling inside Marin as she stood a meter apart from Auch's. They had their armor on but helmets off, and rank-smelling wind played with their gray hair as it washed over the landing pad.

"I'm not expecting you to tell me where you'll go next," he said. "But I fulfilled our bargain. Didn't I?"

"You did."

He'd even given her tiny warning before shooting Nihl, which had allowed her to wrest the Sith's lightsaber from Ania's throat. She found herself more grateful for that than everything else.

"I want your word now," he said. "No more coming after me. No more trying to expose the truth from Botajef. That happened a long time ago. It's time we all moved on."

Those were words of a murderer evading justice for his crimes, but they might also be true. Perspective was a strange thing. Forty years ago her decision to spare Yaga Auch's had been a tiny redemptive act for her crime of killing his father. Long after it had become the source of burning regret, and Auch's the subject of her sublimated self-loathing. Now, finally, Marin saw the effect of her choice play out across the stars and end a war. Maybe this war would never have happened if she'd killed young Auch's; maybe it would have raged wider. There was so much she could never know, and it seemed to her now, after so many years of being so many different women, that the only way to stay sane was to do what her heart told her was right and march forward without looking back.

It was something Ania had told her, though she'd never used those words.

"I was a Jedi once," she told him. "And Jedi don't believe in retribution."

“Mandos do.” Anger cut through his voice. “I’m never forgetting what you did to my *buir*. I’ll never forgive either.”

“That’s your right,” she said softly. She didn’t have to add that he’d killed people she cared about too.

Auchs’ right hand hovered closer to the butt of his holstered blaster, and for a second it edged closer to the weapon. Marin didn’t remind him that Ania and Liem were watching from *Free Agent*’s landing ramp, nor that Sora watched from the shuttle’s.

Auchs didn’t need a reminder. He lifted his hand and held it out. “I never want to see you again,” he said. “If I do, I might not be charitable.”

“You don’t have to worry about me. I promise.” She gave it a short, firm shake, then released. It felt like she was letting go of so much more.

Auchs took two steps back, eyes on hers. Then he turned and walked determinedly toward his shuttle. Marin went to join Ania and Liem. She stopped at the base of *Free Agent*’s ramp and looked over her shoulder, one last time. Yaga Auchs had already disappeared inside his ship, but his daughter lingered. Sora met Marin’s eyes for a second, and she could feel wariness and gratitude mixed together. The younger woman looked away first and walked into her ship.

“So what now?” asked Liem. “Are we... done?”

“I think so,” Marin exhaled. She felt light and free, younger than she had in decades. “I would say we should go home... but I’m not sure where that is anymore.”

“Simple.” Ania put a hand on *Free Agent*’s hull and smiled fondly. “It’s always where the heart is.”

The shuttle that carried Yaga and his daughter off Bakura took them to his frigate, which in turn carried them further, all the way back to the Javin sector where the Mandalorian battle groups had gathered following the Ssi-ruuk and Nagai withdrawal. The trip was long enough for Yaga to review the reports from his lieutenants and survey the situation. The raiders were in retreat and without their leader it was doubtful their alliance would last. Coruscant had put out a statement that it would keep its fleets in the Outer Rim committed until they’d liberated every planet the invaders

had taken. That could take time; the Ssi-ruuk in particular might be loathe to surrender consecrated worlds.

That left the fate of the Mandalorians an open question. The payment he'd negotiated from Stazi, and thus the Federation, was for help at Bakura and the other battle zones. They'd laid down no plans beyond that, and as he rode to the rendezvous Yaga pondered whether to take his soldiers back to Mandalore or to offer to help the Federation's mop-up operation, for a respectable price. He expected the Federation to refuse; they knew from both sides how fickle mercenary armies were, and they'd want to liberate those worlds themselves. Nonetheless, he decided it would be good to make the offer. The worse Coruscant could do was turn him down.

His thoughts had turned determinedly toward the future since Bakura. It was a strange thing, but it came with surprising ease. As he and Sora transferred from his frigate to the larger one that had commanded at Lutrillia, he told his daughter, "I'm not worried about finding work for our people. Even if the Federation turns us down- which they probably will- we've proven for the whole galaxy how well we can fight. That's the best kind of advertising."

"You don't want to keep our people on Mandalore?"

"I don't want us mixed up in big galactic affairs. I never have," he said grimly. They both knew the costs typically outweighed benefits. "We'll hold back and prove our worth in smaller fights. Things still aren't all settled on Coruscant, and if that gets messy again I want our people secure."

Sora nodded approvingly, but with a doubtful voice she asked, "Do you really think our backs are clear?"

"We'll find out one way or the other, but I think so."

"Then you trust that old woman."

He still hadn't told her their whole history. Maybe he never would; like her father, Sora needed to move beyond the past. "I don't think she'll knife us in the back. We made our bargain and I won't break it unless she does."

Sora gave him a surprised look but said nothing. Yaga guided their shuttle into the landing bay, and once it settled they unstrapped themselves from their seats, put on their helmets, and went out into the hangar.

The welcome party was larger than he'd expected, with over a dozen Mandos in full *beskar*. From their armor he recognized Thorum Rhal, Vaun Zerimar, and several other of his lieutenants. Their faces were hidden but their postures were stiff and alert, and Yaga knew instinctively that this wasn't a victory crowd. He stepped past Sora and with a hand gesture signaled her to remain behind.

"Welcome back, *Mand'ador*," said Rhal. "I heard you got what you wanted from Bakura."

"I did." He looked across the other masked helmets. "I know you've all got questions. I'll explain everything in time. I just want to say I'm proud of all my *Mando'ade*. You fought well, turned this war, and won us lots of credits from Coruscant too. We should all be happy."

"We should be," Rhal said. "But it's hard right now, *Mand'ador*."

There was reproach in the title, and Yaga stiffened. He held his hands carefully at his sides, a gunslinger's pose. "What's got up you upset, Thorum?"

Rhal's hand went to his belt and slowly, visibly, drew out a small holo-projector. He held the disc out toward Yaga, tapped it side, and summoned a blue holo-image. Yaga recognized himself with Sora standing to one side and Ania Solo bound between them. Together they faced Darth Nihl's gaunt light-and-dark figure.

He knew what was coming, but he couldn't look away as Nihl told his recorded replica, "You are impressive, *Mand'ador*. I'll make sure you're paid a handsome bonus for this."

And Yaga, deciding to haggle in hopes it would get those two Ssi-ruuk out of the room, said, "I'd like to talk about just how handsome."

"Of course you would." Nihl's voice turned condescending. "One hundred thousand credits."

"For this *dal'ika* I want more. Three hundred."

"You're getting too brazen, Auchs. That's more than we paid you to kill your own *Mand'ador*."

When those words had come out Yaga had felt in instinctive flash to deny it, then decided there was no point. Nihl knew exactly what he was and so did the others in that

room. All he'd wanted to do was get those Ssi-ruuk away so they could kill Nihl. He hadn't thought about the exchange getting recorded on someone's helmet monitor.

Yaga watched himself say the condemning words. "I needed Ordo out of the way so I could be in charge. That was part of my reward. I couldn't care if this Solo woman lives or dies."

"Then you should take one hundred thousand and be happy."

"I'm giving her to you because I know you want her. I could have just let her go. This is a sign of friendship."

Rhal tapped the disc and ended the replay. He lowered it, put it in his belt, and shifted his hand to his blaster. "Got anything to add to your confession, *Mand'alor*?" He put absolute venom in the word. The others reached for their weapons too but nobody drew, not yet.

A strange melancholy settled over Yaga Auchs. He wasn't even sad or angry. All the lofty goals he'd conjured since Bakura dissolved like a dream as he faced hard justice. He'd thought he'd escaped it and never expected it to come like this, but now that it had he found himself taken by weary relief. He'd been running from it for so long, always looking over his shoulder, but that was over now. He could stop running and face the end bravely, like his father had.

The thought gave him freedom, except for one thing. With a click of the tongue Yaga changed his helmet's frequency to speak solely to his daughter. With a whisper he said, "Get to the shuttle. Run and don't look back."

She got out "*Buir-*" just as he grabbed his blaster. Rhal drew just as fast, and the other Mandos on his flank. Yaga didn't even try to dodge. Impact pounded his *beskar* chestplate, kicking him off his feet, dropping him on his back and stealing all his breath.

Nonetheless he raised his blaster and kept firing at the figures around him. There was another volley of laserfire, loud and bright and so close, and he only realized his right arm hurt when he couldn't raise it. Other parts of his body hurt too; hip, left side, shoulder. He caught the whiff of scorched flesh and fabric and knew some of their shots had landed true. Not even *beskar* could stop everything.

He groped his left hand across his body, grabbed the blaster, and fired again. One of his attackers was knocked back, he couldn't tell which. Another rain of laserfire blinded him and washed pain over his body, but the pain was gone in a second. His entire body turned numb; nothing moved anymore. He couldn't even turn his head.

As darkening shadows loomed over him, Yaga saw a wash of light and heard the roar of starship engines. The noise faded and then the light, and then even shadows started fading to black. He couldn't feel much anymore except satisfaction that Sora had gotten away, and the hope she might escape grief and fear like he never had.

Maybe she would, maybe not. He'd never know. The choice was hers now.

Fatigue came on suddenly and strong, as it often did nowadays, and Marasiah retreated to her quarters shortly after the sun went down. Barely remembering the job she'd sent Azlyn and Ganner on, she told them to report directly to her once they'd spoken with Derrol, then settled in for the night.

She quickly decided she'd be glad for some company. Her quarters felt hollow without Antares, and never more so than in early evening, when the darkness and silence grew oppressive with memories of happier nights. To chase them away she turned on reports from civilian news-nets and found them quite triumphant over the situation in the Outer Rim. The conflict was getting more attention now than it had when at its peak, but she couldn't feel cynical even when she tried. People wanted to hear about triumphs, not the truth.

She was nearly lulled to sleep when the entry buzzer sounded from her door. She forced herself upright, shut off the holo, and staggered to get feet. She was halfway to the entrance when it occurred to her how strange it was to have her door rung directly, without being told someone was coming. She was sure Azlyn and Ganner would contact her in advance before arriving.

Curious and too tired to make sense of things, Marasiah went to the door and opened it. Her uncle stood directly in front of her, black-cloaked form almost filling the doorway,

but over his shoulders she could see four stormtroopers, one of whom seemed to be wearing an extra pack on his back.

"I'm sorry, Sia," her uncle said, "But you have to come with me."

"What?" She blinked weary eyes. "Uncle, what are you talking about?"

"You have to come with me," he repeated. "I promise you won't be harmed."

Her tired mind struggled to understand. She looked past him again and saw the nearest stormtroopers had their rifles drawn and at their sides. Their postures were tense and expectant. Marasiah tried to reach out with the Force and find their intentions but she felt nothing from the men before her. She tried to sense her uncle but again, nothing. Not a carefully-walled mind, only a void. She shifted, looked at the stormtrooper in the far rear, and saw the drooping yellow tail of an animal clinging to his backpack.

Ysalamir, she realized. The exceptionally rare creatures were the only known animals that could create a field pushing back the Force.

Her uncle would have gone to great lengths to obtain one, which meant tonight must have been a long time in the making.

"Don't go back inside," Hogrum warned. "Don't go for your lightsaber and don't call for help."

"Uncle—"

"I promised you wouldn't be harmed and I meant it. Now come with us."

The enormity of what was happening finally dawned on her. She'd already felt lonely and abandoned but she'd never imagined she'd be betrayed by the only family she had left. Worse, the Force had given her no warning. She was one of the last beings in the galaxy who would touch it and it had been useless to save herself just like it had failed to save Antares.

Marasiah wasn't angry. Far from it. If anything, she felt like weeping.

Trying to sound strong, probably failing, she asked, "What will you do now? Make yourself emperor? Disband the senate?"

“Nothing so grand. But there are traitors that have to be dealt with.”

“I’m looking at one now.”

He shook his head. “No. You’re letting your husband’s killers escape and the Empire die from within. I understand you’re afraid of falling to the dark, but our enemies *must* be stopped. If you don’t have the strength, then I’ll do it instead.”

He snapped his fingers, and the front two stormtroopers raised their rifles. She looked straight down their barrels and didn’t feel any fear, just sadness. She’d been trained to rule from birth. After her father’s inglorious death she’d inherited more than she’d ever dreamed, and every step of the way she’s tried to rule strongly and justly, learning from her parents’ flaws as well as strengths.

But Marasiah had failed, utterly.

“And how,” she whispered, “Will you justify this, Uncle?”

“The situation will justify itself. You’ll see shortly.” He withdrew a hand from his cloak, revealing a set of stun cuffs.

She felt brief temptation to turn and run, to lunge into her quarters, get clear of the ysalamir’s Force-blind bubble, grab her lightsaber, and fight. But that was foolish. She’d have no defense against the stun-blasts that would take her in the back and drop her pathetically to the floor.

Within that ysalamir’s field she was as Force-blind as everyone else in the galaxy. It was a great leveler, and for the first time she really realized how helpless her Knights and Jedi must have felt when stripped of their powers.

A leader must be seen to be strong. Her father had told her that many times, and in that he’d been right. It didn’t matter who saw that strength; sometime the only audience that mattered was yourself. Marasiah took a breath, gathered her dignity, and held out her arms. The shackles were cold and heavy. When they clicked tight around her wrists the sound reminded her of a locking door.

The meeting with Senator Derrol in his office had been one of the more unusual conversations Ganner had ever had. He and Azlyn had sat with the Chagrian for half a standard hour, asking him a variety of questions about Kagar Aynes, Gar

Stazi, and especially the being who'd attacked him in his apartment's parking garage. It has been Azlyn's idea to present him with three images showing different Iktotchi males and ask him to pick the one he'd encountered. Derrol had dithered in indecision for a good thirty seconds before picking the wrong face. What that meant, they didn't know.

At the end of the meeting, Azlyn had played their final card. She'd shown him the images of Derrol and Stazi, both wearing cloaks and bent close in an anonymous alley. The senator had screwed his face up in confusion, then gotten angry. He'd insisted he knew nothing about these images, then condemned their quality, and finally said that it could have been any Chagrian and Duros in those shots. The latter two points weren't entirely wrong, and his anger had seemed genuine. Ganner and Azlyn had hurriedly excused themselves after that.

Ganner had left the senate building wishing, more strongly than normally, that he still had the Force to help him. As it was, he and Azlyn were two fumbling, half-trained agents. He wondered aloud why Intelligence Director Chalk's people hadn't handled the investigation. Azlyn had given an uncertain shrug, the same one he'd gotten when he'd asked about Eshkar Niin's current status.

Questions multiplied and certainties got scarce. As he and Azlyn entered the palace complex and made their way to the empress' quarters, Ganner felt like a truly pathetic investigator. The mechanical brace around his foot and entire right leg hardly helped. Its metal boot clacked and the gears strained with every step. It made him feel half-droid and he nearly complained about it to Azlyn before catching himself.

After clearing security for the residential section of the palace, they rode the main lift to the high level where the empress' quarters were. They walked through the hall, silent except for the aggravating clank of Ganner's foot. Ganner had been to Marasiah's personal quarters only a few times in the company of Antares, and Azlyn had never been at all, so he took the lead, guiding them down same-looking hallways, through intersections and around corners.

He was almost at their destination when he swung around one bend and froze. He watched Hogrum Chalk's

unmistakable black profile cross the intersection ahead, followed by two white-armored stormtroopers with rifles clasped to their chests. His first thought was that Chalk had just paid a visit to the empress; then he saw Marasiah herself dressed in a plain white gown, shuffling after her uncle with head bowed and stun-cuffs around her wrists. Two more stormtroopers followed, and one of them wore a strange rack on his back with a yellow lizard-like creature clinging to it.

They'd passed out of view before his mind registered what he'd seen. Azlyn, standing beside him, gasped. She took him by the shoulder, tugged him back around the corner, and whispered, "That was the empress! What were they doing with her?"

"Hogrum Chalk was leading her."

"Chalk? But she was in binders."

"I know."

The empress was under arrest, and by her own uncle. Ganner didn't have to understand the details or ask himself where his loyalties lay. He was an Imperial Knight. He'd sworn to serve the light side of the Force and the Fel monarch; only one of those remained available to him and she was slipping out of his grasp.

He felt a moment of clarity unlike anything since losing the Force. After so much uncertainty and doubt, he knew exactly what he had to do.

"There's a second, secure lift," Ganner said, recalling the layout of this wing. He put a hand on his lightsaber. "Chalk must be taking her on that one. If we hurry we can get behind them and take out the first two troopers."

"There's still Chalk and the other two."

"We just need to get the empress away from there." He turned the corner and started back around the hall, but was instantly reminded of his clanking metal boot. Nothing was easy after all. He snarled and said, "Hurry ahead, Azlyn. I'll be right behind you. We can still get them."

"Ganner—"

The boom that interrupted her made the whole corridor shake and knocked them both off their feet. Alarms started wailing, and after they pushed themselves upright they picked up the reek of smoke.

"What the hell was that?" Azlyn gasped.

"It came from the direction of the empress' quarters." Ganner started toward it, not caring about his boot anymore. He couldn't even hear it over the alarms.

They only turned one more corner before finding an inferno at the end of the hall. Heat and choking ash rushed toward him, and Azlyn pulled him away.

"Ganner, we have to get out of here!"

"But the empress—"

"Chalk has her now. We don't know where they've gone. Come on, we have to go!"

They hurried back to the main lift but found it unresponsive, either deliberately or because of the explosion. Fire was still raging on this level and the air was slowly becoming filled with smoke. Azlyn asked, "Do you know the way to the other lift?"

"I think so, but it might not work either."

She put a hand on her lightsaber. "We can cut our way inside the shaft."

Ganner had a better idea. He grabbed Azlyn's wrist and led her down half-remembered corridors. Smoke became thicker, the air hotter, and he was relieved when he spotted one dark transparisteel window at the end of the hall.

They both took out their sabers and carved away the edges of the thick pane. Azlyn gave the window one strong kick to knock it into a long free-fall. Fresh air rushed their faces, pushing back the smoke, and Ganner stuck his head through the gap and peered down. It was a long fall but there looked to be a ledge to stand on some forty meters down.

"Don't jump this time," Azlyn said as she reached for the fiberchord cable reel attached to her utility belt.

"Didn't cross my mind," said Ganner as he reached for his own.

They magnetized one end of their cables to the window-frame, then vaulted the cut-through transparisteel edge and began lowering themselves to the ledge far below. Without the Force to guide their descent they needed to use gloved hands on the ropes and feet on the building-side. Ganner's metal boot continued to clank on the smooth face but he barely heard it over the roaring of wind.

The window they'd carved through now spilled some smoke into the air, but it was far less than the empress' quarters themselves, which were still aflame and furling a black pillar into the night sky. Airspace around the palace was highly restricted and as Ganner and Azlyn made their descent the first rescue airspeeders arrived. They hovered in front of the explosion site, shining their searchlights into the smoke and pumping arcs of flame-retardant into the wreckage of the empress's quarters.

None of them paid any attention to the two Imperial Knights descending on the other side of the building, and now that they were out of immediate danger Ganner's thoughts began to clear, and he wondered whether they wanted help from the rescue teams. There was no telling how many people were involved with Hogrum Chalk's coup. He wanted to believe it was only a few but that may have been wishful thinking.

When they finally reached the end of the ledge they carefully reeled in their cables. They were still trapped on the side of the building but when they looked down several more levels they spotted a row of windows, dark from the inside. Using cables once more they dropped themselves lower, then used their sabers to carve through the windows and re-enter the building.

"What do we do now?" asked Azlyn as she reeled in the last of her cable.

"We have to make contact with the other Knights. Let's hope nobody's thrown up a jamming field." Ganner took out his comlink and keyed the frequency for Treis Sinde. Since Antares' death the old warrior had become de facto leader of the Imperial Knights. He was pleasantly surprised when his comlink clicked and a gruff voice said, "This is Sinde. Speak."

"This is Ganner Krieg. I have Master Rae with me."

"Ah, thank the Force you're alright. We weren't sure where you were."

"Master Sinde, do you know what's happened?"

"We heard about the explosion at the empress' quarters." Sinde's voice went grave. "Every single Knight's been roused. Director Chalk's gathered us in the training center.

Until we find out what happened to the empress, succession falls to him.”

Ganner’s chest tightened. “Master Sinde, is Chalk there now?”

“He’s just arrived. Ganner, Azlyn, you need to get here too. I don’t know what we’re facing but we’ll need every Knight together.”

It was a moment history could tip on, but Ganner was too tired and frantic, too Force-deaf, to know what he should say. He looked to Azlyn for guidance and saw her own indecision. For all they knew Chalk was going to arrest all the Knights as well; they couldn’t afford to go to the training center. Ganner’s heart told him he could trust Sinde, but there was no way to know if this comm line was secure.

Azlyn made the final decision. She grabbed the comlink and said, “Master Sinde, the empress is *not* dead. If Chalk tells you that, he’s lying.”

“What? Azlyn, what are you-”

“We can’t come, Master Sinde, and you never talked to us.”

Before Sinde could ask more, Azlyn shut off the comlink, dropped it, and smashed it with her foot.

Breathless, Ganner asked, “What now?”

“We get help.”

“From who?”

Her eyes were uncertain. It was clear she had no answer. Azlyn took his hand, swallowed, and said, “We have to get away from here. Off Coruscant. After that... I may have some ideas.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The extent of Bakura's devastation, though horrific enough as relayed by holo-image, was even more staggering when Gar Stazi saw it with his own eyes. When his shuttle had come in to land at the capital, it had banked low over kilometer after kilometer of blackened cityscape, and his stomach had turned to think of the lives lost, the agony sustained. His ship finally sat down in the government district, one preserved island amidst Salis D'aar's wreckage, where a modest welcoming party took him and several other officers from the fleet to meet with the local government. They were all broken, weary men, and Bakura's president didn't even try to put a brave face on it.

It was a miserable experience, and Stazi was eager to take his fleet and finish fight against the retreating Nagai and Ssi-ruuk, but he had to do this too. After the damage Bakura had taken, a visit by the commander of the liberating army was the least it deserved. Still, he was relieved when the audience was over.

He headed back to the landing zone with the Imperials' Captain Bovark. They walked slowly down the presidential palace's halls while their guards- two stormtroopers and two Alliance, shadowed them from several meters away.

"It's going to take decades to rebuild," Stazi told Bovark wearily. "Even if Coruscant commits massive funds here, it may still take a generation to heal the damage."

"One generation would be lucky," remarked Bovark. "And that's assuming Coruscant will have the political willpower to deliver appropriate aid."

The long-whiskered Nimbanel had been the first of Roan Fel's officers to reach out to Stazi's renegades. That had been years ago, and their initial encounter had ended with Stazi trying to knife the Imperial over a misunderstanding, but intervening experience had turned Bovark into one of his favorite Imperial officers. He lacked their usual haughtiness and replaced it with practicality; Stazi suspecting being a non-human in a still-too-human navy might have something to do with that.

"I'm hoping with the fight in the Outer Rim wrapping up we can finish the fight back home," he told Bovark.

"That would be ideal."

"I'd like your battle group to accompany mine, Captain," he went on. "I want to get the Nagai firmly under heel. That means chasing them all the way back to Saijo. Subduing them might be easier, now that Darth Nihl is gone. With a power vacuum on top, they'll be more likely to surrender."

"I'd like that too, Admiral," Bovark sighed. "But I don't think that will be possible."

Stazi looked at him sideways. "What do you mean?"

Bovark held up a hand and snapped thick fingers. Suddenly the stormtroopers lifted their blasters and held them at the heads of Stazi's guards and were using free hands to disarm the Alliance men. Stazi instinctively reached for his service pistol, but froze with hand on hilt when he saw the blaster Bovark had drawn.

"Captain, what the hell is this?" growled Stazi.

"I'm truly sorry, Admiral, but I've been ordered to take you in for questioning."

"Questioning? For what?"

Bovark's voice turned hard. "The murder of Empress Fel."

Shock replaced anger. Stazi's mind reeled. "Explain," he rasped.

"I just got word from Coruscant. An explosion went off in the empress' private quarters when she was inside."

The empress, dead. She'd been an honorable woman who'd dealt with him fairly, despite their many disagreements. He felt grief for her, but more for the fragile peace she'd been instrumental in upholding.

Bovark went on, "I've been ordered to take you into custody and deliver you to Coruscant. You may not communicate with your people. You will be taken directly to my ship and thence to the Core."

"You can't seriously think I was involved. I've been out here the entire time, fighting this war. *Winning* it."

"I understand you're wanted because of your connection with Senator Porat Derrol. He was already a prime suspect in the first assassination attempt. I understand they'd found evidence implicating him in the bombing of her quarters."

Stazi didn't believe Derrol had been involved in Bavinyar. He didn't believe any of this either, but Bovark clearly did. "Who's been telling you all this? Who gave the order to arrest me?"

"Director Chalk. I understand he's also issued orders to arrest some other senators."

Stazi neither liked nor trusted the man, but he hadn't expected Chalk could be so brazen. Grief over his niece's death must have pushed the man over the edge and spurred him to root out all the Alliance radicals his paranoid Imperial mind had conjured up. If he'd been on Coruscant Stazi might have been able to get the situation under control, but no, he'd been all too eager to race to the Outer Rim and be an admiral again, a war hero, because he'd always wanted to be that instead of a politician. War was more exciting, glamorous, and pure than government, but government could be just as dangerous.

Stazi understood that now, too late. Vanity had undone him.

"Draw your weapon slowly and give it to me," Bovark said. He still had his pistol aimed at Stazi's chest.

Anger overtook him, anger at Bovark and Chalk and most of all himself. Stazi snarled, "I'm still a leader of the Galactic Federation. You don't have authority over me, Captain."

"I have my orders. Please, surrender quietly."

Stazi had never surrendered quietly, not even at Caamas, when all the guns of the Empire had tried to pound his fleet to dust. He couldn't jump to hyperspace this time; his guards were disarmed, Bovark had the draw on him, and he could never outrun a blaster bolt. Fighting would accomplish nothing this time.

But Stazi was still a warrior, for better or worse. The choice was a simple one. He wrenched his blaster from its holster but Bovark was faster. All he had to do was twitch a finger. Stazi didn't even get a shot off before the stun blast took his chest at point-blank. When he hit the ground he felt nothing, not grief or anger, satisfaction or shame.

Shado Vao was glad to be off Bakura, but once he'd been transferred to Captain Bovark's star destroyer he found himself in an aggravating limbo. The ship remained in stationary orbit as post-battle cleanup continued, and there was nothing for Shado to do in the modest cabin he'd been provided except wait. He didn't know how long this ship would remain at Bakura or where it would go next. He had no desire to spectate on continued campaigns against the Ssi-ruuk or Nagai, but wasn't in a position to take a ship and ride back to Coruscant either. Captain Bovark himself was down on the planet, and none of his subordinates offered Shado help or clarity.

Therefore, when he learned Bovark had finally returned to the ship, Shado went to intercept him. It was probably bad form bothering a captain on his bridge but Shado didn't care. He needed to get off this ship, either on a ride to Coruscant or a ferry to Admiral Stazi's flagship. He knew *Alliance's* crew would be more welcoming than these Imperials.

When the Jedi stepped onto the command deck, no crewman stepped up to reprimand him for his audacity. They all looked busy, even frantic, and the few that noticed Shado promptly ignored him. He wandered deeper onto the bridge like a ghost, taking careful steps toward Captain Bovark as the stout Nimbanel hunched over the comm station.

"Captain," an ensign said, "*Alliance* is hailing us again. They're insisting to know what we've done with Stazi."

Bovark's whispers twitched anxiously. "Weapons team, warm cannons but do not take target locks unless I say so. Shields, the same. Stand by but do not raise. Engines, warm hyperdrives. Just in case."

Shado couldn't help himself. He lurched across the deck until he had a hand on Bovark's shoulder. "Captain, what's going on? What happened to Stazi?"

Bovark jerked his hand off. “Master Jedi, stand back. If you interfere I’ll have security remove you.”

“I need to know-”

The captain chopped a hand. “If you can’t watch in silence you won’t watch at all.”

Shado restrained himself and stepped away from the comm station. A pair of stormtroopers had appeared a meter behind him, rifles drawn but held low. Shado lowered his hands to his sides and kept them there.

Bovark turned back to the comm station and said, “All right. Open a link to *Alliance*.”

The captain breathed deep and clasped hands behind his back. A holo sprung to life before him, showing the head and shoulders of a Weequay Shado recognized as Jhoram Bey.

“Captain Bovark, explain yourself,” Bey growled. “We understand you’ve taken Admiral Stazi aboard your ship without telling us.”

“That’s correct. I’m sorry to inform you that the admiral has been detained for questioning in the murder of Empress Marasiah Fel.”

Shado could hardly parse the words. The deck seemed to spin around him as Bey said, “That’s outrageous. You have no authority.”

“I was personally ordered to apprehend Stazi by Hogrum Chalk, who’s assumed the empress’ authority.”

“Stazi had nothing to do with the bombing! He was *here*, fighting the Ssi-ruuk with you!”

“Director Chalk has evidence that must be investigated. I assure you, Captain, Stazi has not been harmed. You have my word.”

“Let me speak to me.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

“And this is not acceptable.”

“You’re in no position to threaten me, Admiral Bey.”

“We have more ships than you do, *Captain Bovark*.”

“Over Bakura, yes, but galaxy-wide Imperial ships outnumber Alliance ones four to one. What we’re doing is legal and essential if we’re going to learn the truth behind the empress’ murder.”

“Stazi had *nothing* to do with it.”

“Then an investigation will prove it. I understand you’re angry, Admiral, but this is bigger than your loyalty to Stazi. The empress has been murdered and the stability of the galaxy is at stake. If you do something rash-”

“Like Stazi did at Caamas?”

Bovark took a deep breath. “I have my orders. I’ll carry them out, for the good of the galaxy. If you try to interfere in any way you’ll be considered an enemy of the Galactic Federation.”

Bey glared murder through the holo-image, but shut the connection abruptly without reply. Bovark immediately spun toward the crew pit. “All ships, raise shields and weapons. Nav teams, start plotting a hyperdrive jump. Tactical, give me a full display.”

A large holo-map sprung to live, portraying the Imperial and Alliance ships over Bakura in different colors. The Alliance vessels were more numerous but the Imperial forces, including four formidable star destroyers, were clustered together and could defend fiercely if necessary.

Once Bovark’s crew completed orders, they shifted to watch the battle display, as stunned and breathless as Shado. He was still trying to wrap his mind around the empress’ death. He knew nothing about the when and how, and even less the ways it would break apart the already-splintering Federation.

He only knew he was about to watch the first break now, over Bakura. Jhoram Bey and *Alliance*’s crew were devoutly loyal to Stazi, even fanatical. Many of them had been at Caamas, where the Duro had defied another surrender order and initiated a decade-long guerilla campaign that ultimately toppled Darth Krayt. They’d never meekly submit.

Minutes passed. The Alliance ships neither opened fire nor hailed. They shifted position slowly, drawing nearer to the Imperial vessels, but were still out of shooting range.

And then, as one, the Alliance ships swung noses away from Bakura. Their sublights went hot, pushing them out of its orbit. Over a dozen lightspeed engines flares and dwindled to nothing as the ships disappeared into hyperspace.

Bovark exhaled relief, like many of his crew. The captain asked, “Any parting message?”

The comm officer shook his head. “None, sir.”

Shado knew what Bey would do. They all did. He’d emulated his captured leader. There was no telling when, where, or how they’d strike next, but Hogrum Chalk had an enemy. The real question was how many other Alliance ships would follow.

“All vessels, lower shields and stand down from combat alert,” said Bovark. “Helm, start plotting a course that will get us back to Coruscant. Make it indirect and use non-standard routes. Bey might still try to ambush us.”

As the crew complied, the captain finally turned to Shado, who remained frozen and silent at the center of the bridge. Bovark sighed once more and said, “All right, Master Jedi. I believe I can answer your questions now.”

Bakura had felt like a resolution not just to a war but so much of Marin’s life. The news that came in afterward, via scattered news broadcasts and Mandalorian rumor-chains, proved that wishful thinking. First they heard about the bombing on Coruscant and the death of Empress Fel. Next came word that that her uncle, Hogrum Chalk, had taken command of the chaos on the capital and was ordering arrests of prominent Alliance figures while claiming he had proof of their complicity in both assassinations.

Marin was an old woman and she knew what revolutions and coups looked like. When she’d been just fourteen years old her uncle Davek, Marasiah’s grandfather, had taken command of the Imperial Remnant by launching a counter-coup against a group of hardliner moffs and admirals. The assassination of an Imperial head of state had sparked that conflict, too, and Marin knew that the resolution to this one would be decided not by the senate- apparently active but hobbled by the loss of key members- but by the actions of the military.

The grim reality was that power ultimately came from the barrel of a laser cannon. Mandos knew that well.

The escalating crisis was worrying, and Marin was glad her family and the Mandalorians would have no part in it. The empress’ death struck her in ways she hadn’t expected. She’d never met the woman and had only talked to her father once

in the past forty years. Nonetheless, Marasiah Fel had been family in a way, and more, she'd been one of the last Force-users left in the galaxy. Her rare powers and Skywalker blood hadn't saved her from a young death, but another thing Marin knew from bitter experience was that Anakin Skywalker's legacy was rarely kind to those forced to carry it. That was why she'd tried to shirk it for so many years.

She also wondered how Ania would be handling the news. Her daughter had worked for, or with, the empress on several occasions. From what Marin could tell their relationship had been respectful but not warm. She'd been about to contact *Free Agent* when she got a hail from someone else.

That blow landed hardest.

"Are you sure about this?" She felt pinned to *Champion's* pilot seat as she looked at Parc Bralor's flickering holo-image. "Where did you hear it?"

"A couple different sources. I don't have any reason to doubt it," the man said. "Auchs is dead. They say he was executed."

"By who?"

"Rhal. Zerimar. Some of his other lieutenants. They confronted him as soon as they met up after the battle. Apparently they had proof Auchs killed Chernan Ordo. He didn't even deny it, just went for his blaster. They gunned him down right there."

Marin didn't know what she felt. Her emotions were a tangled mess.

Bralor noticed. "I thought you'd be happier."

She groped for certainties. "What kind of proof?"

"I'm not positive. I heard from one barve it was a holo of Auchs talking to a Sith."

"A Nagai?"

"That's right," he nodded. "Darth Nihl himself, apparently. I guess they were bartering over services. The Sith told Auchs he'd killed his *Mand'alor* for less than he wanted now. Auchs said he'd done it for cheap because he wanted Ordo out of the way." Bralor shook his head. "All this time I thought you were on a *di'kutla* quest, Skirata. But I guess you were right all along. Maybe I owe you an apology."

"Save it."

He raised a brow. "Did your people have anything to do with that? I understand if you don't want to say."

From his description it was clear the recording had been taken at Auch's and Nihl's last encounter, in the president's office on Bakura. She understood everything, and with understanding came an emotion she could name: anger.

"I had nothing to do with that," she said simply. It wasn't as true as she wanted.

"Then I guess justice works out after all. Strange galaxy."

"Who's *Mand'alore* next?"

"Don't know. My bet's on Thorum Rhal, unless Karr or any of your barves want to throw their helmets in the ring."

"I'll let you know," she said dryly. "Anything else?"

"Don't think so. Just relaying the news."

Before Bralor signed off, Marin thought to ask, "What happened to Auch's daughter?"

Bralor's face creased as he remembered. "I heard she grabbed his ship. Ran off. Nobody knows where. If I were Rhal and his buddies, I'd watch my back for her."

Marin hoped not, for Sora Auch's sake. She hoped the young woman could live free of the grief and anger that had ruled her father's life. She doubted it, but she hoped.

"Got it. Thank you, Parc."

Bralor nodded and killed the connection. Marin remained alone in the cockpit, trying to assemble herself. She'd never thought she'd feel such grief for a man she'd hated for so long, but she'd vowed he had nothing to fear from her. She'd promised him his life and failed to keep that promise. She'd done that once before, to someone she loved far more than Yaga Auch, but it roused the same flavor of regret.

Bakura hadn't been a resolution after all. It was just one more event in the long chain of life, a turn in a story that could never be predicted or controlled, and only seemed to have purpose when you looked at it in reverse. And in that kind of story there was only one resolution, the kind where only darkness followed.

When she felt in control of herself, Marin rose from her seat and walked down to *Champion's* cramped crew quarters. She rapped knuckles on the door to Liem's cabin, then opened the door without waiting for his response.

Her nephew sat upright in his bed. He was dressed in a loose jumpsuit and seemed to have been dosing. He blinked and asked, "*Ba'vodu*, what's wrong?"

"Yaga Auchs is dead. Executed by his own lieutenants. They had proof he killed Chernan Ordo."

"That's good news, isn't it?" He didn't try to act surprised. "It's what we wanted all along."

It was what they'd wanted, the singular goal she'd gathered all her people around. Most of them would be ecstatic and unable to understand why Marin didn't share their joy.

"You took the recording," she said. "Who did you send it to? Rhal?"

Liem drew himself straight. "Does it matter?"

It really didn't. The deed was done. "I told Auchs it was over if he helped us take down Nihl. He kept his side of the bargain and I didn't. You've made a liar out of me."

Liem was defiant. "Why are you getting mad over *shabla* Auchs? He was a *chakaar* who killed his own *Mand'alor* and got in bed with the Sith. The galaxy's a better place with him gone."

Maybe, she thought. Or maybe Liem's choice would ricochet through history and wreak effects none of them would imagine. She knew he could never understand that. He was far too young.

"You broke the promise I made," Marin said firmly. "Once we get back to Concord Dawn, you can do what you want, but you're not crewing for me again. Understand? I only work with people I can trust."

He showed hurt in the Force, but his voice was unrepentant as he said, "Fine. I understand."

Marin didn't want to be here anymore. She turned to go, then stopped and looked back. "One more thing. Yaga Auchs is dead but his daughter's not. They say Sora got in her *buir*'s shuttle and flew off. Nobody knows where. If she saw your recording, odds are good she figured out who took it."

Liem paled as the first ricochet struck home. Marin left without another word and closed the door behind her. She got three steps away before emotions rushed her: grief and anger and relief and brittle love. After she'd lost Ania and her husband she'd lost touch with every part of herself

besides regret. She'd felt hollow and cold, trapped half-dead in a life permanently decreased. Not anymore. She'd forgotten how overwhelming it could feel to be alive.

The feeling was interrupted by a mechanical chime. Another message incoming. She didn't even what this one might bring. Marin went back to the cockpit, activated the transceiver, and brought up the face of Hondo Karr. That was a slight surprise; gloating had never been his style.

"You've heard the news," she said.

Hondo nodded. "Auchs is dead. I understand if you're not happy about it, but me and Tes just popped a bottle of *tihaar*. That's not why I called, though."

"Then why did you?"

"I just had an interesting talk. You remember when we were tracking Rhal last year with Federation help?"

"Of course." Hondo had hooked up with a contact from Rogue Squadron, plus a Jedi and an Imperial Knight. "I heard the Alliance fleet from Bakura's unaccounted for. Did you hear from them?"

"I thought I might, but no." Hondo shook his head. "My contact came from another source. My question for you is: Are you interesting in picking up a couple strays?"

With everything happening, Shado felt, the new Jedi temple on Coruscant should have felt upended. Instead its corridors were quiet and the hollow routines of its remaining members continued as they had. It was, Shado thought, a sad and final testament to the Jedi's irrelevance in this strange new galaxy.

He alone stood in one of the gathering rooms and watched a news holo play out. The reporter said, "Senate speaker Tem Brighton reiterated his objections this morning, calling the arrest of Senators Nelloran and Kaige, as well as Admiral Gar Stazi, an illegal power grab by Hogrum Chalk. The regent released a short statement repeating that everything he had done was based on hard evidence that will be presented in public trial, and that he was confident all the accused had been involved with the assassination of Marasiah Fel.

"The regent's office has also doubled its reward offered for the whereabouts of Senator Porat Derrol, who evaded the

team sent to detain him after Empress Fel's death. Just yesterday, Regent Chalk stated that Derrol's flight was itself a confession of guilt and called on all citizens to help locate the senator, out of respect for Marasiah Fel's legacy. A price is also being offered for Senator Derrol's wife, who is believed to be on the run with him.

"Regent Chalk also announced that in two days a memorial service will be held for Empress Fel. It will be widely broadcast but in-person attendance is expected to be limited to senior government officials and members of the Imperial Knight and Jedi Orders."

"It is a dilemma," said a deep voice beside Shado.

He jerked in surprise and saw Grand Master K'Kruhk, three meters of piled muscle, tangled fur, and fierce-looking tusks and talons. Despite that, he was as gentle as always as he said, "To attend the memorial will be seen as a sign of approval of the regent's policies. To refuse it will be blatantly disrespectful to the empress."

It was a trap, and Shado didn't envy K'Kruhk the dilemma. He also found it hard to care. "Does it really matter what the Jedi do?"

"I have always held that it does."

"But does it?" He looked up at the Whiphid, broadcast completely ignored now. "When the Force spoke to us, maybe it did. But now, Master, what are we? We're just beings like any other."

"We still remember what the Force said to us. That can still be a guide."

Shado fought the urge to weep. He'd explained events on Bakura to the Jedi Council but he'd been circumspect about his internal struggle. He'd been hoping the Grand Master, the oldest living Jedi, would have some wisdom to offer instead of the unconfident platitudes he'd recited to himself as he marched Bakura to its ruin.

His voice choked as he said, "Master... I'm sorry. I can't do this any longer. I can't pretend to be a Jedi. I'm *not*. None of us are. We're all lying to ourselves. So were the Sith. We've all been trying to press on and act the same, but trying to pretend things hadn't changed *destroyed* the Sith. The Jedi have to stop."

Shado blurted it all without thinking, and when he stopped to breath K’Kruhk regarded him, the expression of his long tusked face impossible to read. Still gentle, he said, “If you feel you are no longer able to do your duties as you have, I understand. There’s no need for you to be what you’re not, Shado Vao. You can leave Coruscant and walk your own path.”

He’d been edging toward that decision since Bakura, maybe longer, but he also revolted from it. Being a Jedi was all he’d known since childhood. He’s spoken with his sister Astraal, who was stricken by the death of her friend the empress and uncertain of her own fate. They might end up derelict together, just like they’d been twenty years back as wandering orphans before two different organizations offered them purpose.

Bakura had convinced him that if the Jedi continued to deny what had happened they’d damage not only themselves but those they tried to help. For the good of the Jedi and the galaxy he needed to convince them otherwise, but even as Shado felt that he doubted his own intentions. Even now he wanted to force others onto the path he thought was best for them. Maybe Recado was right, and idealism was just vanity disguised.

There was only one thing Shado was certain of absolutely. “I can’t do this anymore,” he croaked. “I’m sorry, Master. I may... stay at the Temple for a time. Until I decide where to go next. But I can’t perform missions for the Jedi anymore. I can’t be an active knight.”

His hand moved toward the double-bladed lightsaber at his belt. He could still remember constructing it during his training, testing its twin blades against Cade’s and Azlyn’s, and feeling flush with pride the first time he ignited the weapon. It had become an extension of himself and a constant reminder, even in the darkest days of Krayt’s purge, that the Force was still with him.

K’Kruhk sensed his reluctance. “There’s no need to give up your weapon.”

“Yes there is,” Shado said. He pulled it from his belt and held it out. K’Kruhk locked his claws around it and took it

from Shado's hands. He stared down at the empty blue palms and wondered what else belonged in them.

They'd stripped down the homestead before leaving and returned to find it untouched by anything except weather. That was no surprise to Ania. Concord Dawn wasn't a busy world and the farm her mother's people had occupied wasn't prime real estate. She'd never felt any attachment to the place and was surprised to feel a familiar warmth as *Free Agent* set down alongside *Starlight Champion* and *Black Justice*.

There was another ship there too, a small scout craft she'd never seen before. As Ania, Sauk, and AG-37 stepped outside, she spotted her mother, now dressed in a simple tunic, approach the scout ship alongside Hondo Karr and Tes Vevec, still in *beskar*. The hatch on the scout ship's cockpit was opening and it looked like someone was getting out.

"Any idea what this is, Ania?" asked Sauk.

"No clue. My mom didn't tell me anything."

She wondered if Marin had anything to tell. Hondo and Tes were the ones walking ahead with seeming assurance. Her mother was holding a step back and keeping one hand near her holstered blaster.

Great, Ania thought. She wasn't fool enough to think beating the Sith at Bakura would solve all their problems, but she'd at least hoped things would quiet down for a while.

"Stay back, guys," Ania told her friends. "I'll take a look."

She trotted up beside her mother and whispered, "What have we got? Trouble?"

"I don't think so."

"You're reaching for your gun. That usually means trouble."

Marin looked sidelong at her daughter. "It means I'm cautious."

"Right. Caution. That's what you were doing on Bepin and Bakura." She slapped the blaster at her own hip. "Well, I'm cautious too."

She looked ahead and saw two figures emerging from the scout. Both wore red armor instantly recognizable as Imperial Knights'. One was a tall man with long hair pulled

into a ponytail. The other was a woman with short red hair, scars lacing an otherwise pretty face, and a respiration device built into the chestpiece of her armor. That was a distinctive look and Ania instantly remembered her as part of the empress' entourage when they'd gone to Gree Space.

Seeing the Knights stirred unhappy memories of Marasiah Fel. The death of her cousin had been a strange and heavy blow that left Ania despondent for the ride back to Mandalorian space. She'd never exactly *liked* her haughty, imperious cousin, and none of the situations they'd been forced together had been pleasant ones.

Nonetheless, Marasiah had been a just woman, which was more than Ania could say for most authority figures she'd met. Her death been like an erasure of their success at Bakura. It made the galaxy feel endangered again.

She'd wondered, too, where Jao was, whether he'd heard about Marasiah's death and how he'd felt. She'd tried to hail *Mynock* after getting the news but there'd been no reply. She'd thought tracking them down would be *Free Agent's* next mission now that her mother's drama was resolved, but these two Knights were an uncomfortable reminder that nothing was ever really over.

The Knights shook hands with Tes and Hondo. The latter looked back to Marin and Ania and said, "These scarlet barves are called Ganner Krieg and Azlyn Rae. As you can guess, they were in Her Majesty's Service. Scarlet barves, meet Marin and Ania."

Even without a last name, Ania seemed to register for them both. She hated when that happened. The two Knights exchanged glances, like they were deciding how much to tell. Ganner told Ania, "I understand you're a relative of the empress."

"A distant cousin," she said, and wasn't going to get her mother involved unless Marin volunteered. "I didn't think that was common knowledge."

Ganner looked awkward. "I've been... closer to the empress than most."

"I'm so sorry what happened to her."

The other Knight said, "You don't understand."

Ganner started, "Azlyn, are you sure—"

"The empress isn't dead." The woman's scarred face went hard. "She's been arrested by her uncle, Hogrum Chalk."

That took everyone by surprise, even Hondo and Tes. The Mando woman said, "What do you mean? That was a *coup*?"

"Staged as an assassination," Ganner nodded grimly.

"How do you know all this?" asked Ania. "And why aren't you with all the other Imp Knights on Coruscant?"

"It's a long story, but we *saw* it. It's the truth," Azlyn insisted. "When we ran we didn't know what Chalk was going to do with the Imperial Knights. It looks like he's kept them intact for now, but we can't tell who's loyal to him."

"And so you run to a bunch of renegade Mandos?" Tes asked, still skeptical.

"Your husband said you're not so renegade anymore," Azlyn eyed Hondo. "I tried to get in touch with Anj Dahl, from Rogue Squadron. We think she's with that Alliance fleet that went MIA from Bakura after they arrested Stazi. We couldn't manage it. I'm sure they're laying low."

Ania glanced at her mother. "What do you think?"

She had no idea what it felt like when you read somebody's intentioned in the Force, and she had no idea how her mother would want to handle the revelation just thrown in their laps. Maybe Marin would call it quits again and stubbornly retreat from the galaxy's turmoil like she'd done before Ania was born. Even after all they'd been through, her mother was still a mystery.

Marin, however her Force-skills worked, got her read on them. She nodded slightly and said, "They're telling the truth."

"Of course we're telling the truth," Azlyn said testily.

Ganner looked thoughtful. Maybe he'd read more into Marin's short response. "We have no idea where the empress is being held. We can be sure Chalk's got her very, very secure. But wherever she is, we have to get her out."

"How do you know she's not dead already?" asked Hondo.

"We saw her under arrest, being taken from her quarters right before the bomb went off," Azlyn clarified. "Also, Chalk is her uncle. I don't think he'd just kill her."

Ganner passed firm gaze across the group. "We need to find the empress and free her. If you won't help us with that,

at least help us find that rogue fleet. We don't have much credits to pay you with... but we'll compensate you however we can."

Ania looked at the faces around her: Tes skeptical, Hondo conflicted, her mother deep in thought. As for Ania herself, decision came instantly. It was like when she'd decided to help Jao hunt Darth Wredd, or her mother chase Yaga Auchs. There seemed no other way.

"She's my cousin," Ania said. "And I guess she's even kind of my empress. Of course I'll do what I can. Don't worry about payment either, I'm actually pretty rich. I can't speak for the others, but--"

"I'll do it too," Marin put a hand on her daughter's shoulder. "And I think I you're going to need my kind of help."

Chapter Thirty

The end of their quest was the sole habitable planet in a system the Gree called Rohakalla. There was no name for the system in any other language they could find. It didn't even appear on standard galactic star charts. Located at the very edge of the galaxy, past the Gree Enclave on the outermost rim, was a system that matched the vision Cade Skywalker had received in the Tho Yor: binary white and blue stars, orbited by four planets. Outermost was a blue gas giant, then a red one, then a grey dead rock, and finally, closest to the double-stars, was a single inhabitable world.

The description matched one in the index from Eli Horn's recovered Gree archives. With those coordinates as a guide, *Mynock* and Eli's shuttle tracked each other from the Deep Core to the Outer Rim's edge, to a place surrounded by the starless black of the intergalactic void, with the galactic disk a distant streak of lights. It was a strange, lonely, desolate place left behind after the Gree empire collapsed tens of millennia ago. It was the place they needed to be.

Cade felt like he was coming here a second time. His visions inside the Tho Yor no longer crowded out his waking thoughts as they had when he'd returned to consciousness, but they were with him still, less clear and ordered than true experience but more vivid than remembered dreams. When *Mynock* exited hyperspace above the planet, however, the recalled images matched perfectly with what he saw before them. Sitting in *Mynock*'s co-pilot seat, he shuddered.

The others, thankfully, didn't notice. Jariah was at the helm, with Deliah and Lowbacca strapped into seats at the rear of

the cockpit. They'd come here prepared for anything, including a waiting Sith-allied fleet, but all they saw was a lonely planet, dark against the intergalactic void, lit ghostly blue-white in the overlapping glow of its suns. *Mynock's* sensors detected strange radiation, presumably coming from the stars, that was hindering their communications. They were effectively sealed from the greater galaxy, locked in a place of ancient mystery and uncertain danger.

Cade's mouth had gone dry; he found it hard to speak. Lowbacca roared, asking whether there were any ships in orbit, and Jariah checked sensors. "Nothing yet."

"The shuttle?" asked Deliah.

"No, but he might be a little—" Jariah paused. "Yep, there he is. Just dropped out behind us."

"Shields up?"

It took a moment for Cade to remember that was on him. Since Tython it was hard to stay focused; that was why he'd insisted Jariah fly them in. With effort, he worked his console and turned on *Mynock's* shields. Thankfully, Eli Horn wasn't coming in with blazing guns.

Horn began hailing them a minute later, as his shuttle settled in orbit alongside *Mynock*. Cade turned on audio and said, "Welcome to Rohakalla. How's your prisoners?"

All he got in reply was static. Cade scowled.

"Interference, remember," said Jariah.

"Yeah, that." He strained to glance out the viewport. The Sith seemed to be holding steady on their flank. Likely he was scowling at his own comm unit right now.

Deliah checked her console. "I think visual sensors are still working. I'll drop up into low orbit so you can scan."

"Right," said Cade, "And hope we find it before Talon's *bukee* does."

Lowbacca gave an optimistic roar; he was just glad no Sith fleet was waiting for them.

He could say that again. On the long ride out from the galaxy's center to its edge, *Mynock's* crew had kept checking the news feeds and gotten a semi-coherent a picture of galactic affairs. The shattering of Nihl's war fleet must have broken what was left of the One Sith, hopefully forever. According to Talon, Nihl hadn't placed much priority on the

hunt for Khat Lah. That meant Horn was without any of the backup he'd surely tried to arrange, and that meant Cade and company had the clear advantage.

Cade would have felt better if they'd been able to salvage any backup of their own. The situation on Coruscant was a mess too, the Jedi Council incommunicado. They said Marasiah Fel was dead, but deep down Cade doubted. He'd never been close to his cousin, not at all, but they were two of the last Force-users left in this galaxy and Skywalkers besides. He'd believed he'd feel her death in some way.

Whatever had happened to Marasiah, he couldn't do anything for her now. The mission he'd taken on after his mother's death was finally close to completion, but he felt no fulfillment. It wasn't Eli he was worried about, or the hostages still held by an ex-Sith apprentice out of his depth. It was that damned planet, bathed in ghostly light. It was manifestation of his vision in the Tho Yor and the final proof that everything he'd seen there, everything strange and overwhelming and horrible and grand, was truth he'd need to reckon with.

As *Mynock* and Eli's shuttle drifted in orbit over Rohakalla, Cade watched the scans of the surface for anything that might mark the hypergate. This planet had greater cloud cover than Tython, making it difficult. As they waited for something to show, Jariah asked, "You feeling anything?"

"Like what?" Cade grunted.

"You getting anything from the Force? You know, guideposts, roadsigns..."

"I'm not seeing any big banners sayin' HYPERGATE HERE. Sorry."

"Just thought I'd ask."

Jariah was trying to cover her nervousness; Deliah and Lowbacca remained conspicuously silent as they waited for something to show. Finally, as they slipped over the planet's nightside face and escaped the binary star-glow, Cade picked up something.

As he leaned close to the sensor board to examine the imaging, he said, "Looks like something in the twilight zone, southern hemisphere, latitude approximately-"

"I see it too," Deliah said as she looked at her scanner.

They waited a tense moment. The Sith ship on their wing didn't contact them and didn't budge. There was no way to know if Eli had seen it or not.

Finally Jariah tapped power to engines and said, "Let's check it out."

Mynock dove into the atmosphere first, but Eli's shuttle was right behind them. As they rocked through initial turbulence, Jariah looked to his friend and asked, "Feel anything now?"

"No roadsigns, nothing calling at me," Cade shook his head. "I'm going in blind same as you all."

That was a comfort to nobody. Gripping the throttle tight, Jariah plunged them into Rohakalla's fast-darkening sky.

Eli set his shuttle down beside *Mynock* at the edge of the canyon in which the hypergate was located. By the time he gathered his prisoners, lowered the landing ramp, and marched them outside, the last hints of twilight had vanished from Rohakalla's sky.

The planet had turned from its suns and the galactic disc both and night was terrifying black, devoid of moons reflecting solar glow, lit only by faint stars drifting on the very edge of the intergalactic void. The night was dark and quiet; no animals sounded in the distant forests and no wind blew.

Jaos Assam was still grievously wounded after the fight on Tython, and Kyra was barely able to hold him up as they staggered together down the ramp. Lowbacca was there waiting, and the strong Wookiee gathered the wounded man in his arms and carried him inside *Mynock*.

After letting Lowbacca take Assam, Kyra sidled beside Skywalker. Lights from *Mynock* cast half his face in white while the rest remained black. In the harsh chiaroscuro Eli saw none of the smug condescension he was used to.

Softly, eyes on Eli, Skywalker asked Kyra, "How you holding up?"

"I'm in one piece." She hugged arms around herself.

"Glad to hear it."

"Now give me *your* prisoner." Eli put a hand on the lightsaber at his belt. He didn't intend to use it, but he wanted to demonstrate he was ready to.

Instead of putting up a fuss, Skywalker nodded soberly. "She's all yours."

Talon was brought out from behind Skywalker. Her hands were still bound as Jariah Syn and Deliah Blue roughly pushed her by the shoulders. When they loosened grip enough the Twi'lek jerked free and stepped up to Eli. Her apprentice flicked on his lightsaber and snipped the shackles apart. She nodded in silent gratitude.

"Looks like we all got what we want," Skywalker said. "You know what comes next, right?"

Eli and Talon looked toward the black gash in the landscape. From their perch, it looked like a long fall into absolute dark.

Talon said, "Will we go down together? Or will you make us fight you for access?"

He expected Skywalker to make some sneering remark. Instead, tiredly, he shook his head. "We'll go down together. Just don't try anything stupid. Only one of us has got the Force, remember?"

"Vividly," Talon said.

When Lowbacca returned he brought *Mynock's* repulsor-sled with him. They loaded on together: Eli, Talon, Skywalker, Kyra, Deliah, Syn, Lowbacca, the blue and white astromech. It seemed only the protocol droid remained in the ship to care for Jao Assam. The sled carried them over the crevasse's edge, then lowered them steadily into the steep-walled gash. Its forward headlights painted streaks of white, sharply illuminating the layered rock walls and the gap's flat bottom. It looked to Eli like a dried riverbed.

The repulsor-sled continued forward. Its headlights lit on their final destination: a great hollow portal, side pillars nested halfway into the crevasse walls, joined together by an arch. Deliah, working the sled controls, slowed them down and put them to rest some twenty meters from the portal itself.

Even after they stopped, nobody got out. Everyone was looking to Skywalker, who stared ahead at the white-lit gate but also at something deeper. He was searching the Force, Eli knew.

It was Kyra who asked, "What do you feel?"

“People,” Cade’s brows tightened. “They’re close. Can’t see ‘em, but they’re close.”

“Great.” Syn hefted his blaster. “They watching us?”

“Most likely.”

Deliah worked the sled’s headlights, shifting them to illuminate the slices of canyon wall near the gate. Light revealed nothing except bare rock. “Any idea how many?” she asked. Cade shook his head.

“What about the gate?” asked Talon.

“I don’t know. Something feels... off. About everything.”

“We can’t just stand here forever,” said Eli.

“Probably right.” Cade squeezed Deliah’s arm. “Stay here and man the sled. I’m going ahead.”

Her blue lips pressed tight, sealing rebuttal. Cade released her and stepped onto the dried riverbed. Kyra followed, then Eli and Talon. Lowbacca and Syn took the rear, carrying lightsaber and blaster rifle respectively. They stepped slowly toward the gate, long black shadows cast ahead of them. Every few meters they stopped to listen. Eli looked around constantly but saw nothing move in the deep night.

And then they heard the whistle of objects flying through the air. Eli ignited his lightsaber on instinct, though he saw nothing coming at him. He heard the sound of impact on dirt nearby, then another sharp whine. Air brushed his cheek as something passed frightfully close.

Syn turned on the light attached to his rifle-barrel and swept it across the dirt. The lit-white circle passed over a pair of large red insects half-lodged in the soil. Something else sailed overhead and Eli ducked low, pulling Talon with him into a crouch.

To his surprise, Syn didn’t duck. To his greater shock, the man shouted into the darkness: “*Kor’chak mongark krok’hal churrok! Yuuzhan Vong char’meke norrak mar! Norrak mar!*”

Eli understood none of what he said, only that, incredibly, this human was speaking Yuuzhan Vong.

Skywalker and Lowbacca had their sabers ignited as well, and dragging Kyra with them they huddled beside Talon and Eli, but Syn stayed on his feet, spinning a tight circle and shouting the same words in Yuuzhan Vong over and over

again. When he finally stopped silence filled the crevasse once more. No projectiles sailed at them and nothing seemed to be moving in the dark.

After a few heavy heartbeats, a series of torches lit up on either crevasse wall. In their flickering glow, Eli perceived over a dozen bodies emerging from hiding-places in the layered rock. Some faces were laced with tattoos and a few with scars; others were totally unmarked. All contained the sloping foreheads, fleshless noses, and thin lips of the Yuuzhan Vong. Some remained perched on the walls, clutching thud bugs and amphistaffs, but others shimmied down the rock to ground level and approached the newcomers.

These, too, carried weapons. Syn put his rifle on the ground, held out both hands, and said to allay them, "*Morrak cho'vokh nor'shak. Norrak mar vennak kor'mesh.*"

The Yuuzhan Vong regarded him with open curiosity, but their attention quickly veered to the three figures with lightsabers. Eli felt their eyes pass over him. They were hard and skeptical; these aliens were easily capable of violence.

The Yuuzhan Vong on ground-level formed a loose circle around them, some clutching thud bugs, others pointing amphistaffs. None seemed to be wearing armor, and Eli thought he could handle at least one if they decided to charge.

"This is all wrong," Cade whispered.

"No, you think?" grunted Syn.

Talon caught the strangeness in his voice. "What do you mean, Skywalker?"

"These Vong... I can feel 'em in the Force. *All* of them."

Everyone stared at him in shock, even Syn. The dreadlocked man gathered himself, turned to the closest Yuuzhan Vong, and said, "*Mor'nak kholla sevvak norsh Khat Lah zhek? Norsh Khat Lah?*"

The Yuuzhan Vong passed glanced among themselves. Then a voice boomed out of the darkness: "*Drek'kan morakh selnat!*"

The Yuuzhan Vong shifted to open a hole in their circle in front of Skywalker. More torches flared out of nothing and bobbed as they approached the circle. The one in front had the size and shape of a human- or Yuuzhan Vong- but the

three trailing behind it were markedly different. Though the bodies were draped in robes they seemed tall and long-necked. Eli caught a glimpse of clawed finger-tips peeking through their long sleeves and blunt blue snouts jutting out from under their hoods.

The nearest figure resolved clearly in the firelight: a tall Yuuzhan Vong wearing tanned hides layered over a broad chest. His face was unmarked by tattoos or scars but lined by age around the mouth and eyes, and the long hair that fell straight to his shoulders was black streaked with gray. Eli had never seen a Yuuzhan Vong of that age before, but incredibly, he knew this figure. This was Khat Lah.

It made no sense. He'd last seen the warrior less than five years before. Khat Lah had been a Yuuzhan Vong in his prime, less than thirty standard years. The being before them now looked at least ten years older, but the eyes passing over them were unmistakably Khat Lah's.

Skywalker's memory of the warrior was even dimmer, but he said, "You're Khat Lah, aren't you? We've come a long way to find you."

The Yuuzhan Vong regarded him carefully. In clear, familiar Basic he said, "I've heard the Force has gone silent. The Jedi are extinct."

"Not this one." Cade lowered his lightsaber and closed his eyes. Concentration washed over his face. Khat Lah flinched in surprise as the human touched him in the Force.

Khat Lah frowned. "How is that possible? Who *are* you?"

"I was hoping you might give me some help on the first one. As to the second... I'm Cade Skywalker. Son of Kol. Grandson of Jade."

The names softened Khat Lah's eyes. He looked over Cade's face, searching for something of the boy he'd known. For Cade, their last meeting had been brief and over a decade ago. For Khat Lah, somehow, it had been even longer.

"We came for you." Cade said and his eyes to the hypergate's arch. "And, I guess, for that thing. Got nudged in your direction on Tython, by a lady named Tasha Ryo."

Eli didn't understand, but Khat Lah apparently did. "Do you know what lies on the other side of the gate?"

"Not really. I was hoping you did."

The robed figures hanging behind Khat Lah stepped forward. Clawed hands pulled back hoods to reveal blue reptilian faces with vertical-slit eyes. In creaking Basic the closest one said, "This gate is the beginning and the end. After eons it has been awakened."

"These are the keepers of the Whills, and they have guarded this place since before our species walked the stars," Khat Lah said. He turned and lifted his torch toward the gate. "There, your old gods sleep."

Coda: A Long Time Ago...

Anil Kesh, that three-legged metal spider, looked curiously aloof as it perched over the Great Chasm of Tython. Though its central, conical copula had suffered a few scorching hits in the recent battle, most of the structure was still intact, its skin the same slick gray as before.

The same could not be said of the surrounding landscape. The Rakata invaders had fought fiercely to get inside the Chasm and access the ancient Kwa infinity gate inside. Pillars of smoke rose from the rugged rocks and hills and a few fires still burned around the crashed remains of starships: some Je'daii starfighters, some Rakatan gunships. Of the Rakatan vessels far less remained. Most of those had been destroyed the bursts of violent energy that had escaped the Tho Yor, leaving little recognizable behind.

If Anil Kesh seemed aloof from the devastation, the Tho Yor seemed triumphant. The black stone double-pyramid hovered above the hills, Chasm, and temple all, as though in demonstration of supremacy. For as long as the Je'daii could remember the nine Tho Yor had hovered above the Je'daii's nine temples; the ancient arks that had brought them to Tython had become objects of mystery, seemingly inert for all those millennia.

Not so anymore. The Rakata invasion had fundamentally changed things for the Je'daii in many ways, but Lanoree Brock suspected the Tho Yor marked the biggest change of all.

Her gunship-sized Peacemaker had survived the battle with only minor damage. She'd been flying high over Anil Kesh

when the Tho Yor had come alive and blasted dozens of Rakatan vessels out of the sky. She'd heard that the other Tho Yor had done the same thing, as if they'd all awoken at once to aid Tython's defense.

Lanoree didn't understand any of it, lest of all why the Tho Yor had only awakened now, after the Rakata had ravaged the Tythan system for a year, spreading death and darkness.

As she stood on the rock beside her set-down Peacemaker she stared up at the Tho Yor, wondering, and trying not to be angry. Wind blew across the rocks, stirring her long brown hair and red scarf, carrying the smell of hot ash.

As a child Tython and all its unexplained mysteries had filled her with wonder. She'd become a Je'daii ranger in order to better explore all this system had to offer. Experience had dulled her enthusiasm. The apparent death of her brother a decade ago had robbed the universe of much of its joy. The war with the Rakata had been grueling beyond measure.

The most irrevocable damage, though, had been done shortly before the Rakata came. When she'd been forced to kill her brother for a second, final time.

Their parents were both Je'daii masters, and they'd started their training as journeyers together. Dalien Brock had come to hate the Force and believe that his destiny lay among the uncharted, unknown stars beyond the Tythan system. He'd abandoned his training, murdered another journeyer, and faked his own death. Lanoree had been just a child then herself, and nothing she could have done would have stopped Dal's descent into madness.

That was what her parents had told her again and again after Dal's second, final death. Reason might believe it, but the heart never could.

He'd been trying to activate an ancient gate when Lanoree had been forced to kill him. That had been in the Old City; he'd uncovered and reactivated a mysterious device, apparently of Gree origin. Yet they said the gate, now destroyed, at the Chasm's bottom was Kwa.

It had made little sense then and made none now. Everyone else was stunned and relieved to know that the Rakata invasion was finally over. Lanoree was horrified by the

realization that Dal had gone mad, and she'd had to kill him, and it had all been for nothing.

She felt sick and empty and as she stared at the Tho Yor she hated it for all its well-kept secrets.

Lanoree stayed like that for a long time before she heard a Hunter starfighter set down beside her Peacemaker. She turned and watched as the cockpit popped open and a single figure emerged. The gray-skinned Twi'lek removed his helmet, tucked it underarm, and walked toward her with a tired gait. Hawk Ryo projected his own flavor of sadness in the Force.

Hawk was older than Lanoree, and she'd learned things from him on the few missions they'd shared as Je'daii rangers before the war. As he came up alongside her he nodded. She nodded back. They both turned eyes upward, toward Anil Kesh and the Tho Yor.

"I still don't understand any of it," she told him. "The infinity gate in the Chasm..."

"Destroyed," Hawk said.

"And the Tho Yor—"

"Awakened, all of them. At least, those that survived."

"I didn't realize we'd lost any."

"Three were destroyed by the Rakata bombardments before they had a chance to awaken."

"I still don't understand why they awakened at all."

"I do," Hawk said. "Somewhat." He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Lanoree could feel him reach out with the Force. "I can feel her inside it," he said.

"Who?"

"My niece. Tasha."

Lanoree didn't understand. She knew of the younger woman and had met her on a few occasions. She'd been a Je'daii seer, not a warrior, and as such their paths had rarely crossed. Sometimes, bitterly, Lanoree had envied those Je'daii who fought the war with dreams rather than blood and tears, but she knew that was unfair.

What she didn't know was how Tasha had awakened the Tho Yor. "Your niece... is she *inside* it?"

"I think so." Hawk didn't open his eyes. "I spoke with Master Ters Sendon. He said they spoke with the Kwa

holocron and followed its instructions. Tasha sacrificed her flesh in the core of Anil Kesh... But that wasn't the end of her. I *feel* her inside the Tho Yor. I believe she's in *all* of them."

He made it sound as though she'd transcended her mortal body to join the Force in some deeper way. Lanoree looked up at the Tho Yor and refocused on it. Like most Je'daii, she'd tried to probe the objects with the Force before and gotten nothing, not even a hint of how they stayed suspended in the air. Yet this time there was something different about the Tho Yor. She caught the faint whisper of life from it, though it was not like that of any sentient she'd known.

Mysteries and mysteries, still. Lanoree ached for understanding.

"Master Sendon said the only thing of Tasha that survived was the holocron," Hawk said. "Maybe we can consult that for some guidance."

"Maybe," Lanoree whispered.

"Her mother... her father, my brother... It's not going to be easy explaining this to them."

Lanoree nodded, remembering Tasha's parents: one Je'daii, one crime lord. It was an unlikely family and the young Twi'lek had seemed like she was trying to escape from it into the Force. In a sense, perhaps she had.

"Is it true the infinity gate in the Chasm activated before it was destroyed?"

"I believe so."

Then Dal, who'd gone mad trying to make a dark matter activation device for a hypothetical Gree hypergate, truly had died for nothing. She'd killed him for nothing. Lanoree didn't even want to weep; she wanted to collapse on the stone and never get up.

But she felt a tug from the Force. She and Hawk both looked up to see the Tho Yor slowly dwindling as it rose higher in the air.

Hawk gasped. "Do you feel that?"

Lanoree got nothing clearly, just vague whispers. "No..."

"It's Tasha. I can *feel* her."

The Tho Yor rose higher. It ascended to the blue sky smoothly, not budging an inch in high wind. Maybe this was

it, Lanoree thought. The Tho Yor had come to Tython ten thousand years ago. Maybe now, finally, their mission was accomplished and they were going back to where they came from.

She ventured, "Is Tasha saying... goodbye?"

Hawk's eyes narrowed. "No... No, not at all. She's saying... *follow me.*"

Lanoree frowned. The two of them stood side-by-side as the Tho Yor got smaller and smaller, until it was just a speck of black against blue. Finally, Lanoree turned back to her Peacemaker. Hawk followed her inside the cramped ship and watched as she activated the communications system.

"Anil Kesh, this is Je'daii Ranger Brock, with Ranger Ryo," she said. "We've just watched the Tho Yor retreat. Do you have any explanation for us?"

The stupefied voice on the other end said, "No, Rangers. But we're getting reports of other Tho Yor ascending as well."

"Can you keep monitoring them?" asked Hawk.

"Of course. This is a science station. But... they seem to be gaining speed. They're reaching upper atmosphere now."

"Understood." To Lanoree he said, "Get us to the temple."

Lanoree didn't argue. She fired up her Peacemaker's engines and pushed them off the rock, leaving Hawk's Hunter behind. It took them only a minute to set down on one of Anil Kesh's landing pads. Lanoree's stomach turns a little as she stepped into the familiar halls of the central copula. As a journeyer she'd loved the science temple for all its wonders. As an adult, she could only look back at it as the place where she'd lost Dal the first time, and after the first time she'd lost him forever.

Hawk walked forward with more certainty, leading her to the observation center on the top edge of the copula. A Zabrak Master, Ters Sendon, was with the technicians there, and he immediately turned to the arrivals.

"Ranger Ryo, I am so sorry about your niece," he said. "I wish I could have offered myself in her place, but Master A'nang insisted only a seer could do what had to be done."

"A'nang?" asked Lanoree.

"The keeper of the holocron," Sendon added gravely.

He gestured to a table in the corner. Placed on it, standing upright on a four-legged stand, was a device with eight smooth triangular sides arranged in a double-pyramid shape. Like a tiny Tho Yor, Lanoree thought.

Hawk took a step toward it, like he wanted to touch it and ask why his niece had to sacrifice herself, but he didn't get a chance. One of the technicians announced, "The Tho Yor are leaving the atmosphere now."

"All of them?" asked Lanoree.

"Nearly," said Sendon. "In addition to the three that were destroyed by the initial attack, one- the great Tho Yor at Akar Kesh- remains on Tython."

"But the rest have fled," said Hawk.

"That's right. You can see on our sensors, they've all risen out of Tython's atmosphere. They seem to be converging in lower orbit."

Hawk and Lanoree crowded the readout screen. Five markers denoted Tho Yor from different sites on Tython, now joining together in a loose diamond formation over the planet. As they watched the ancient arks pushed further. Soon they cleared orbit, passing the paths of Ashla and Bogan, vectoring further and further toward the Tythan systems' outer edge.

"Can you still feel her?" Lanoree whispered to Hawk.

"Not anymore," he said. "She's... too far away."

"What do you mean?" asked Sendon. "Are you saying you felt Tasha in the Tho Yor?"

"Just a little. It was like she was reaching out to me as it left. Not saying goodbye, though. It felt like she was asking me to come with her."

Lanoree didn't see how they could do that. Unlike the Rakata, the Je'daii and their civilization had never gained the power of faster-than-light travel. In best conditions it took over three hundred days to travel from Tython to the outer edge of the star system.

These Tho Yor, using propulsion nobody had ever understood, were travelling faster than that, though still within the limits of lightspeed. Hours passed and the five arks passed further and further through the Tythan system. Sendon got on the comm with Masters at other temples, and

their conference about this sudden event revealed only collective confusion.

Still the Tho Yor soared on. Finally Lanoree said, "We need to ask that Kwa holocron what's going on."

"I think," Sendon said, "That is a wise idea."

He led the two rangers to the far side of the room and picked up the device, cupping its bottom half in both hands. Lanoree felt him touch it with the Force. A luminous image appeared above it, featuring a creature unlike any alien she'd ever seen, draped in hood and robes.

"Peace," the figure said. "I am A'nang of the Kwa, last of the Tython Kwa, master of the holocron. Ask, seeker, and I will guide you."

"Master A'nang," said Sendon, "We have done as you asked. Seer Ryo has sacrificed her body and joined with the Tho Yor. They were weapons, as you've promised, and they've driven the Rakata from our system."

"I am glad of that. It proves the Je'daii are a strong order, in tune with the Force. You have proven that you deserve to survive."

"Proven to whom?" asked Lanoree. "Did *you* create the Tho Yor?"

"No, it was not the Kwa. Their creators are beings beyond your understanding, or ours."

"Master A'nang," Sendon said, "The Tho Yor have left Tython. They appear to be leaving our solar system entirely. Yet I could feel part of Tasha still inside them. It felt like she was asking me to follow."

A'nang seemed to consider. "Like their makers, the full purpose of the Tho Yor are beyond our comprehension. Yet if the devices beckon, you must follow."

"Follow how? Our technology can't match their speed."

"The Rakata have brought many things to the Je'daii, not all of them horrible. There are things you may yet learn from them."

"You mean their technology? But the Tho Yor are leaving now!"

"If you are truly meant to follow, you will be given a chance to do so." The reptilian mouth twisted in an almost-

human smile. "Trust in them, as you would trust in the Force."

The holocron winked off. Lanoree felt a spike of anger; she'd wanted to ask about the infinity gate, and the Gree that had supposedly built the Old City. She'd wanted to ask about Dal.

Instead the Je'daii turned their attention to the sensors. Over the course of the war, monitoring stations had been installed across the system to trace the advance of Rakatan warships. Now the Tho Yor were being tracked as they flung themselves further and further to the edge.

The Je'daii waited. The Je'daii watched. And soon it became apparent that the Tho Yor were not fleeing. They were heading to Furies' Gate, the last and lonely planet in the Thythan system. Lanoree had never ventured that far out, but she knew that Hawk had. He'd said he liked to stare into the interstellar void and wonder what lay beyond. Like Dal, before darkness and desire destroyed his mind.

The Tho Yor did not sail past Furies Gate. Rather they slowed, loosened formation, and appeared to settle in orbit around that outermost planet.

"They're waiting," Hawk whispered. "Waiting for us to come to them."

"And then what?" asked Sendon.

Lanoree knew. "They'll take us beyond." To the place her brother had always wanted to go.

"But we don't have the technology. And the Rakata... even if we can recover one of their ships, they're powered by the dark side of the Force!"

"Maybe there's another way." Hawk narrowed his eyes.

Sendon shook his head in disbelief. Lanoree stared at the sensor, and those five bright diamonds hovering at Furies' Gate. Whatever lay beyond attracted and repulsed her. It had destroyed her brother. Yet she knew that just as the Je'daii had been drawn from all across the galaxy to Tython, they could not stay here forever.

The gate had opened. The destiny of the Je'daii Order lay in the stars beyond.

And she knew hers did too.

